The Collected Short Fiction

Thomas Ligotti

Table of Contents

Allan And Adelaide: An Arabesque (1989)
Charnelhouse Of The Moon (2011)
Charnelhouse Of The Moon (1989)
Les Fleurs (2010)
Les Fleurs (1989)
Les Fleurs (1981)
The Chymist (2010)
The Chymist (1989)
Dream Of A Manikin (2010)
Dream Of A Mannikin (1989)
Dream Of A Mannikin (1982)
Drink To Me Only With Labyrinthine Eyes (2010)
Drink To Me Only With Labyrinthine Eyes (1989)
One Thousand Painful Variations Performed Upon Divers Creatures Undergoing The Treatment of Dr. Moreau, Humanist (1994)
Ghost Stories For The Dead (1989)
The Frolic (2010)
The Frolic (1989)
The Premature Transfiguration (2011)
The Physic (1994)
Sardonic Mundane (1982)
An Interview With Louis Miguel Riaz (1982)
Paradoxes From Hell (1988)
Dr. Voke and Mr. Veech (2010)
Dr. Voke and Mr. Veech (1989)
Eye Of The Lynx (2010)
Eye Of The Lynx (1989)
The Christmas Eves of Aunt Elise: A Tale of Possession in Old Grosse Pointe (2010)
The Christmas Eves of Aunt Elise: A Tale of Possession in Old Grosse Pointe (1989)
The Order of Illusion (2011)
The Order of Illusion (1994)
The Consolations Of Horror (Unknown Version)
The Consolations Of Horror (1989)
Alice's Last Adventure (2010)

Alice's Last Adventure (1989)
Notes on the Writing of Horror: A Story (2010)
Notes on the Writing of Horror: A Story (1989)
Professor Nobody's Little Lectures On Supernatural Horror (2010)
Professor Nobody's Little Lectures On Supernatural Horror (1989)
The Troubles Of Dr. Thoss (2010)
The Troubles Of Dr. Thoss (1989)
The Fabulous Alienation of the Outsider, being of no fixed Abode (1994)
The Fabulous Alienation Of The Outsider, Being Of No Fixed Abode (1985)
The Blasphemous Enlightenment of Prof. Francis Wayland Thurston of Boston, Providence, and the Human Race (1994)
The Blasphemous Enlightenment of Prof. Francis Wayland Thurston of Boston, Providence, and the Human Race (1985)
The Premature Death of H.P. Lovecraft, Oldest Man in New England (1994)
The Premature Death of H. P. Lovecraft, Oldest Man in New England (1985)
The Worthy Inmate of the Will of the Lady Ligeia (1994)
The Transparent Alias of William Wilson, Sportsman and Scoundrel (1994)
The Interminable Residence of the Friends of the House of Usher (1994)
The Unnatural Persecution, by a Vampire, of Mr. Jacob J. (1994)
The Superb Companion of Andre de V., Anti-Pygmalion (1994)
The Scream: From 1800 to the Present (1994)
The Perilous Legacy of Emily St. Aubert, Inheritress of Udolpho (1994)
The Ever-Vigilant Guardians of Secluded Estates (1994)
The Eternal Devotion of the Governess to the Residents of Bly (1994)
The Agonizing Resurrection of Victor Frankenstein, Citizen of Geneva (1994)
The Excruciating Final Days of Dr. Henry Jekyll, Englishman (1994)
The Heart of Count Dracula, Descendant of Attila, Scourge of God (1994)
The Insufferable Salvation of Lawrence Talbot the Wolfman (1994)
The Intolerable Lesson of the Phantom of the Opera (1994)

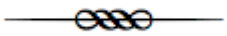
The Unbearable Rebirth of the Phantom of the Wax Museum (1994)
The Greater Festival of Masks (2010)
The Greater Festival of Masks (1989)
The Lost Art Of Twilight (2010)
The Lost Art Of Twilight (1989)
Masquerade Of A Dead Sword: A Tragedie (2010)
Masquerade Of A Dead Sword: A Tragedie (1989)
The Prodigy Of Dreams (2011)
The Prodigy Of Dreams (1994)
Dr. Locrian's Asylum (2010)
Dr. Locrian's Asylum (1989)
The Music Of The Moon (2010)
The Music Of The Moon (1989)
The Journal Of J.P. Drapeau (2010)
The Journal Of J.P. Drapeau (1989)
The Mystics Of Muelenburg (2011)
The Mystics Of Muelenburg (1991)
The Mystics Of Muelenburg (1987)
The Spectacles in the Drawer (2011)
The Spectacles in the Drawer (1991)
Vastarien (2010)
Vastarien (1987)
The Real Wolf (1988)
The Sect Of The Idiot (2010)
The Sect Of The Idiot (1989)
Autumnal (2011)
Autumnal (1994)
One May Be Dreaming (2011)
One May Be Dreaming (1994)
Conversations In A Dead Language (2011)
Conversations In A Dead Language (1994)
Mad Night Of Atonement (2011)
Mad Night Of Atonement (1994)
Ten Steps To Thin Mountain (2011)
Ten Steps To Thin Mountain (1989)
The Master's Eyes Shining with Secrets (2011)
The Master's Eyes Shining with Secrets (1994)
Transcendent Horror (1989)
The Inquisitor (2011)
Salvation by Doom (1994)

Gothic Horror (1989)
The Unfamiliar (2011)
The Unfamiliar (1994)
Exotic Horror (1989)
The Spectral Estate (2011)
The Spectral Estate (1994)
Spectral Horror (1989)
New Faces in the City (2011)
New Faces in the City (1994)
Unreal Horror (1989)
The Demon Man (2011)
The Demon Man (1994)
Demonic Horror (1989)
Suicide By Imagination (2011)
Death Without End (1994)
Macabre Horror (1989)
The Puppet Masters (2011)
The Puppet Masters (1994)
Puppet Horror (1989)
Primordial Loathing (2011)
Primordial Loathing (1994)
Prehistoric Horror (1989)
The Nameless Horror (2011)
The Nameless Horror (1994)
Nameless Horror (1989)
The Career of Nightmares (2011)
The Career of Nightmares (1994)
Nightmare Horror (1989)
Invocation to the Void (1994)
Occult Horror (1989)
The Eternal Mirage (2011)
The Eternal Mirage (1994)
Dreamworld Horror (1989)
The Interminable Equation (2011)
The Interminable Equation (1994)
Nihilistic Horror (1989)
The Strange Design Of Master Rignolo (2011)
The Strange Design Of Master Rignolo (1994)
The Voice In The Bones (2011)
The Voice In The Bones (1994)

The Last Feast of Harlequin (2011)
The Last Feast of Harlequin (1991)
The Shadow At The Bottom Of The World (2011)
The Shadow At The Bottom Of The World (1991)
Flowers Of The Abyss (2011)
Flowers Of The Abyss (1991)
In The Shadow Of Another World (2011)
In The Shadow Of Another World (1991)
Miss Plarr (2011)
Miss Plarr (1991)
Mrs Rinaldi's Angel (2011)
Mrs Rinaldi's Angel (1994)
Nethescurial (2011)
Nethescurial (1991)
The Cocoons (2011)
The Cocoons (1991)
The Dreaming In Nortown (2011)
The Dreaming In Nortown (1991)
The Glamour (2011)
The Glamour (1991)
The Library Of Byzantium (2011)
The Library Of Byzantium (1991)
The Medusa (2011)
The Medusa (1994)
The Night School (2011)
The Night School (1991)
The Dark Beauty Of Unheard-of Horrors (2003)
The Mocking Mystery (2011)
The Mocking Mystery (1994)
The Tsalal (2011)
The Tsalal (1994)
We Can Hide From Horror Only In The Heart Of Horror: Notes And Aphorisms (1994)
The Bungalow House (2007)
The Nightmare Network (2002)
The Nightmare Network (1996)
Gas Station Carnivals (2007)
Severini (2007)
Teatro Grottesco (2007)
The Clown Puppet (2007)

The Red Tower (2007)
A Soft Voice Whispers Nothing (2007)
His Shadow Shall Rise To A Higher House (2007)
The Bells Will Sound Forever (2007)
When You Hear The Singing, You Will Know It Is Time (2007)
Crampton (1998 X-Files Script)
The Shadow, The Darkness (2007)
I Have A Special Plan For This World (2002)
My Work Is Not Yet Done (2002)
My Case For Retributive Action (2007)
Our Temporary Supervisor (2007)
The Mechanical Museum (2002)
Purity (2007)
Sideshow, And Other Stories (2007)
The Town Manager (2007)
The Spectral Link (Introduction) (2014)
Metaphysica Morum (2014)
The Small People (2014)
The Old Shelters (2014)
Poetry
Introductions and Afterwords
Interviews

Alphabetical Index Of Stories



The Conspiracy Against the Human Race: A Contrivance of Horror

Foreword by Ray Brassier
Introduction: Of Pessimism and Paradox
The Nightmare of Being
Who Goes There?
Freaks of Salvation
Sick to Death
The Cult of Grinning Martyrs
Autopsy on a Puppet: An Anatomy of the Supernatural
Notes

Allan And Adelaide: An Arabesque (1989 Crypt Of Cthulhu Version)

First published in *Fantasy Macabre* #2, 1981

> There are some qualities—some incorporate things
> That have a double life, which thus is made
> A type of that twin entity which springs
> From matter and light, evinced in solid and shade.
>
> —Poe, *Silence - A Sonnet*.

1. The brand new beasts

We tried, my twin sister and I, to be rid of them. They had always been my chief grievance about the old house. Despite their nature as a sort of inheritance, I could never place them in the same order as the house itself. To me their necessity was not at all evident, not like the foundation of the house or the particular arrangement of its rooms. And this, I found, was true: they had no relationship to the physical aspects of the house and its furnishings. Their presence was more like that of the grotesque shadows in our lamplit hallways, a shifting and spectral element of the scene. What

a fright to have these shadows, but what a stranger fright would be their absence! Nonetheless, to effect such an absence was precisely my ambition.

So it was that Adelaide and I descended into the deepest cellar of our house to perform the exorcism. By pure chance I had found the exact book, among all the volumes of our vast library, that would finally make this possible. Adelaide had asked me to find a particular book for her one sullen afternoon, and it was right beside it that I found the other book. What good fortune this courtesy to my sister had brought me, though I am never entirely surprised when anything of a pleasant nature is connected with gentle Adelaide.

It was she who made the exorcism a success, even lending the ceremony a measure of queer excitement. In the dripping silence of that stonework cellar, thick candles burned on either side of the statuesque Adelaide, who read in the most compelling tones from the book I held open before her. It was written in a language that I but half-knew, though it seemed the very tongue of Adelaide's soul. One by one I turned the pages when her instructing eyes told me to do so. Oh, the virtuosity of her hermetic performance! From the subterranean passages below that cellar floor the formless squeals of bestial things continually emanated like the seeping cold of the abyss. How long I had listened to those maddening sounds, which sometimes were perceptible in every part of the house and even penetrated the walls of my sleep. Now would be their end. Adelaide spoke the final words of the ritual, and as the echoes died so did the sounds of those things below us become silence. I was free of them.

This, I thought, was the beginning of a golden age in the old house. For the first time in its immemorial history the

house would be filled with only the natural sounds of its residents and those comforting noises of its ripe structure. For the first time I could hear, of a winter's evening, my sister's voluptuous singing without fear of her voice merging with that demonic chorus below. And for a brief time this state of bliss endured. Adelaide sang while I accompanied her on my guitar, the wind of moonless nights harmonized with our music, and all was like a perfect piece of an eternal dream.

It was following just such an evening of song that everything changed, reverted to what it had once been and even worse. In the darkness I awoke among the nightmare-tangled covers of my bed. Sounds had disturbed my sleep, sounds like nothing I had ever heard or hope to hear. What shapes, what forms of corrupt generation made such a bestial cacophony? Every corner of my room, of the entire house, was tainted with surge after surge of acoustic foulage.

I ran to my sister's bed chamber but found it empty and her covers undisturbed, a situation I perceived immediately due to my gift of acute vision in the absence of light. The thought of her roaming alone among the noises of that night caused me near crippling apprehension. Of all dread misfortunes, was she perhaps on one of the lower floors, where the diseased din rose to its most intense potency? Running down the corridor, I arrived at the top of the stairway and to my relief saw the figure of Adelaide already ascending.

But she seemed to be lumbering up the stairs, lacking her usual quality of almost airborn grace. And of all things, it now appeared as if she were walking *backwards*, for I saw naught but her hair tumbling over that pretty face. Even more curious, it seemed that two eyes peered out at me from among her nest of locks. But in the darkness of the middle of

the night, especially that night, one is likely to witness anything, and I rubbed this strange illusion from my sleep ensorcelled eyes, now to see my sister looking as she always had. She reached the top of the stairs, and I embraced her with fear of a thousand things.

"Adelaide, what is happening?" I cried. "Have they returned to torment us?"

She did not reply immediately but rushed us to the sanctum of her bed chamber, where I first noticed the torn and sullied condition of her nightgown.

"Do not worry about my gown, my brother. I have been... working this night. There is not sufficient time in the day for the chores required to keep our house as we wish it to remain."

"But did you not hear the sounds? What are they, Adelaide, do you know? I've never heard such horror, not even before we went into the cellar and drove them out. But they did not make sounds like this. Oh tell me, have the old beasts returned? If so, we will use words of even greater power to exorcise them once again. We still have the book."

When I had finished, Adelaide looked into my face with infinite solemnity, and said:

"We still have the book, my brother, but it is of no use against these ones."

"But they are the old beasts," I argued. "We know them well, their fears and weaknesses."

"Listen to me, Allan," instructed my sister. "These are not our old friends, not the ones who made the noises we had grown to know over the years. These, Allan, are the *new* beasts."

Without entirely comprehending her words, I cried out:

“But they will destroy our beautiful home. They are not like the others. They have the run of the house!”

“It is only for this night, when first they come. You were not here the first night of the old ones.”

“Nor were you, my twin.”

“They are always like this the first night,” she continued without answering my protest.

At that moment I thought I heard something sniffing and wheezing outside the door. Holding one of the lamps my sister had lit, I opened the door and cast its light into the hallway. Whatever was there had moved out of my sight, but for a second I glimpsed a shadow which lumbered at a queer removal from its source. After this sight I informed Adelaide that for her protection I would stay with her through the course of what would no doubt be a sleepless night. Following a moment of strange reluctance on her part, she agreed to my intentions.

Despite the trauma and tragedy of that evening, courageous Adelaide soon retired within the curtains of her bed and fell into a quiet sleep. For what seemed an eternity I stood a vigil by the door, imagining what destruction and stench we would have to confront when we descended into the house next morning. And I suffered that peculiar terror of knowing nothing would ever be the same again.

But eventually, following Adelaide's fearless example, I too ignored the infernal invasion of our home and allowed myself to rest. Soundlessly I crept over to the bed curtains and pulled them back to witness Adelaide's dreaming serenity. With sorrow as my soporific, I curled up at the foot of my sister's bed... and slept.

2. The twin who went to town

My sister Adelaide sometimes forces herself to leave the immense comforts of our old house and travels into town, a place where I have never been. Though we are twins, identical in many habits and activities, somehow this burden has fallen upon her shoulders. “Allan,” she says to me, “do not worry while I'm away. I will be back soon. Then we'll do something special. And take good care of the house, my brother. You know how I like to think of it every moment that we're separated.” I wave to her as she walks down the road leading to the town. Even when she can no longer see me, I wave. And I really don't worry very much about her, for I know she is quite able to take care of herself.

I once asked Adelaide if I might not accompany her on one of these trips into town. For some time the idea had been plaguing my mind. One night, not long before, I had awakened from a wild carnival of a dream from which I could save no memory concerning its particular adventures. But upon opening my eyes I uncontrollably called out something into the darkness. Two words: “The town!” It was after this dream that I appealed to my sister for a chance to see this place which for me was such an obscurity. Would it forever remain so?

“You do not know what it is like, Allan,” she answered. “The people there are not as you are. They are unnaturally confused; always in strange turmoil and doing strange things. They do not have your sense of reason or your balance of temperament. You must stay as you are, then, and remain at the house.”

My sister flattered me, for she has always been the twin with the true powers of reason and deep knowledge. In many disciplines she has been my instructress. So when she

advised that I should be the one to keep myself at home, I listened closely and complied.

Adelaide returned late the other night from her most recent excursion to the town. I was already asleep but awoke when I heard a series of sounds tracing my sister's way to her bed chamber and a well-deserved rest. Later that night I was awakened by a second commotion. At least, I think I was awake and not dreaming. (There are so many confusions in the middle of the night.) In any case, what I heard was a thunderous, insistent pounding on our front door. And there was a voice, the voice of a woman if I am not mistaken. It was difficult to tell because of the storm and the fact that the voice was unnaturally straining itself to be heard above the violent rain and thunder. Perhaps that is all I really heard. But at one point the voice sounded so definite. Quite clearly I heard the unknown woman scream out: “You she-devil! What have you done to them? You didn't need them all.” After this outburst, which rang lucidly in my ears, the voice became lost among all the moaning turbulence of the storm.

The next morning was decorated by a heavy mist, making it almost impossible to see out our windows. As we serenely passed the morning hours, I told Adelaide of my dubious experience the night before. She was tired, and I'm not sure she heard my story properly.

“You see how mad those townspeople are?”

I had said nothing specifically about any townspeople, only the strange woman, who might have come from the countryside of my imagination. “They spread lies even in your dreams,” she continued. “So I hope you will listen to me from now on and never again mention that town. This is for your own good, Allan.”

Ever since then I have never initiated this subject in conversation, though occasionally Adelaide forgets herself and alludes to the matter, saying: “Oh, those horrible people.” But I do not talk about them; I do not even think about their unspeakable lives. I cannot help, however, those things that come to me in dreams. Adelaide cannot blame me for what happens there.

And lately I feel there has been some terrible trouble with my dreams, though not only the ones about the town. There are other dreams, more—how shall I say it?—more loathsomely reverberant in their power. I only hope that this power will soon exhaust itself in the coming nights, like a frightening storm throughout which one is allowed to sleep.

Please let this be so.

3. The demented deacons

I have seen the soul of the universe… and it is insane.

A dream has all but laid my world to waste. Even now I still doubt if I have fully made my way back to the waking realm. But if I have not, the difference is no longer a great one: certain signs have told me there is nothing left that waits on my return. It was a horror. Shadowy things frolicked in the dream like lurid acrobats. And vast stretches of space. But I should start at the beginning, though no dream has one that can ever be remembered.

I found myself in a windowless room lit by candles on metal stands of varying heights. I recall feeling that the room was in a strange place somewhere outside the house. Opposite me was a dark curtain which hung from the ceiling to the floor and spanned the entire distance between the walls, dividing the room into sections of unknown relative

proportions. Eventually I came to realize that I was bound to a throne-like chair facing the curtain. Behind the chair, and in the periphery of my vision, passed back and forth a number of slow moving shapes. These shapes, from the little that could be seen of them, resembled figures on playing cards. (And how this painfully recalls those wonderful games Adelaide was always teaching me.) At some point I came to think of these figures as "The Demented Deacons."

They were carrying on a kind of inquisition, with myself as the sole object defining their roles. They asked me strange questions which suggested matters having nothing whatever to do with my life.

"Who are your gods?" they asked, somehow in unison. Ignorant silence was my answer. They became more clever, gleefully tittering at the virtuosity of their interrogation.

"Do your gods soar?" they inquired, pantomiming the question with outstretched wings that were not wings, nor were they arms. I saw no harm in giving a positive answer, which could be nothing but complimentary to any gods worthy of the name.

"And do they not sometimes descend to earth?" the Deacons continued. To affirm this question, I reasoned, would be safe enough, since its answer was nearly self implied. Complacently I awaited the next question. For this one they had to confer among themselves for a few moments; then, while the others looked on, one of them stepped forward and addressed me.

"When they descend, do they not begin to lumber like beasts? Do they sometimes get down and crawl, your gods?"

I should have remained silent but instead I shouted, "No more of your questions!" This outburst seemed to please the

Deacons to no end as a minor revelation. They next returned to less suggestively sinister questions. Once again a single figure, different from the previous one, came forward to interrogate me.

"Do your gods sometimes speak in tongues strange to you? Do these ones sing their words and use magic? Do they look sidelong to admire themselves in mirrors?"

Again their questions seemed innocent ones, and ones whose denial would be out of keeping with any concept of godhood. Of course my gods, though I knew them not, were learned in the ways of language and sorcery and indeed had much to admire about themselves.

There was now excitement among the figures, even as they lethargically milled around my chair, speaking to one another in low tones. There was some important matter to be deliberated upon, and soon they seemed to have reached a kind of agreement, judging by a certain mood which distinctly emanated from these figures. A new phase of the inquisition was to begin, one for which the interrogative talents of the Deacons were now inadequate. They moved away from my chair, their ranks perhaps dispersing and dissolving back into the shadows whence they came.

I was now alone, my eyes fixed upon the curtain that veiled some indefinite portion of the room. Whatever was beyond the curtain would continue the inquisition, I thought as if this were obvious. And considering the remarkable questions put to me by the playing-card figures, how much more remarkable would be the interrogations from the darker side of the curtain, where there seemed only an unknown and lightless abyss. I waited with an imaginary forevision of the horrific wonders to come.

However, events did not unfold as I expected. Yes, there were questions asked of me from that region on the other side of the curtain. But with these questions the dream diverged into greater realms of nightmare. For the source of these questions was the very genius of demonic dread—that Horror-Maker known to me from a thousand dreams where sudden dread usurps all serenity like a panic cry of "Fire," of "Murder," of stealthy "Invader."

Its presence always permeates the dream: fog with a pallid face drifting in through an open window. It fuses its tormented spirit with dead objects, animating things which should not move or live, breathing a blasphemous life into the unliving. One glance at a design on the wall catches this Horror Maker engendering a world of writhing creatures there. It lives in all things, and they tilt and flutter with a menacing absence of purpose or predictability. Finally it melds with the slowly coagulating shadows, and now it is without limits as it spreads to command a domain of quivering darkness. The universe becomes its impossible body, its corpse. As the blackness of space is its corrupting blood, so the planets are multiple skulls of the freakish beast; the paths of doomed meteors trace the architecture of its labyrinthine skeletal frame; spasms of dying galaxies are its nervous tics; and strange stellar venues of incomprehensible properties are the chambers of its soul. Within this universe the dreamer is trapped, his dreams confined to the interior of a form other than his own. But finally this Horror-Maker moves from outside to inside the dreamer, subverting his heroic autonomy, and becoming one with him. Now it is he himself who generates those nightmares from that design on the wall. Every glimpse conjures universes of cavorting hor-

rors, and ultimately even the crystal absence of the void becomes populated by every monstrosity that can or cannot exist. There is no refuge from the living void, the terror of the invisible. And the focus of my fear sharpened into hideous implications about my sister and myself. The interrogations of the Horror-Maker could not be evaded, unless I was willing to remain in that dream forever.

"I could not murder my sister," I finally screamed. "I loved her with all my soul." But the thing behind the curtain —enveloping, omniscient—continued its torturing queries as insistently as ocean waves collapsing on a dead shore. "No, none of that is true; she was not those things. She was my twin, my companion, my teacher, my—"

I could not go on. I wanted to do something horrible to myself and bring everything to an end. And what could be more catastrophic than to draw back the curtains before me, gaining the most insane and self-destroying revelation imaginable. But I was bound to the chair, or so I thought before realising the truth: that I had never been so fettered, that it was only some perverse illusion which caused me to believe otherwise.

I rose stiffly from the chair, apprehensive of my new freedom, and approached the curtain. Something now seemed familiar about it, something in its folds and texture. But there was no opportunity to think at length about these things, for my terror was becoming too intense to bear any longer. Seizing the soft material in my hands at the point where the two sides of the curtain came together, I resolutely spread my arms and gazed within.

There, in the dark recesses which I searched with my sight, I saw nothing more than another curtain, an inner

curtain that was a twin of the outer one.

I awoke screaming. And this initial terror was infinitely exacerbated when I found that I was not in my own room but was lying in my sister's bed... alone.
Adelaide!

4. The last lesson

I must cease this incessant talking to myself. Any moment now my searching of the house will reveal the place where she has secreted herself, and then I'll have someone else to talk with once again. But suppose she is no longer in the house. Suppose she has gone to the town again, damn her. No, I mustn't say that... she has every right. Adelaide! Aaadelllaide! Where are you? Perhaps I shouldn't be looking for her in these clammy cellars. Why should she be down here? And that horrible squealing of the beasts from below is worse than ever.

I can hear them all over the house now. Silence, you sullen filthy fiends! I will find her despite you.

There she is. No, just the mirror at the end of the hallway. Oh, Adelaide, I'm still the fool you always knew I was. I think you are lost but your presence greets me every place I look. Here now in the library I've found you reading to me tales out of old books. You loved those times as much as I, didn't you? I never thought I was keeping you from places you would rather be. It was just so hard to be alone and to think we would not always remain together every moment of our lives. You were my only life, Adelaide.

Now walking the hallways of our house, I think I see your shadow next to mine there upon the wall. But how many im-

possible things have I already thought real: that we always lived in eternity; that we were more than ourselves; that we could surmount the strangeness which exists even between twins such as we; that there were no secrets dividing us?

But those secrets never estranged us in *this* memory-sealed room, where I can hardly bring myself to pause in my search for you. Here you sang for me in a way that made me imagine we had both passed quietly out of life and were no more than sheer essences harmonising in pools of colour and faded radiance. Painful now to trudge through musty rooms and search the ruddy shadows for your fugitive self, to listen for the tainted echoes of your pure voice only when those beasts momentarily stop harassing the silence with their demon whining. But I'll search on... in every horrible room, for that is what they now are, that is what you have made them.

I'll search the room from which I saw you shyly slipping away one afternoon, and behind whose door I saw that chilling dummy, its hands planted arrogantly on wooden hips and its head thrown back in a frozen burst of laughter. I'll search the room where once stayed a certain *tutor* of yours, whom I never saw except one night as a mere shadow in the garden, a shadow that looked as if it were seeking the smell and feel of damp earth. I'll search the room of masks and mirrors which you didn't think I knew about. I'll search the room where the clock you once brought to our home even now coughs out its chime with lungs that are not wholly brazen. I'll search the room you decorated in red and black, the room to which you retreated periodically to speak prayers which I pray you did not intend me to hear as I stood outside the door. And I'll search the room about which you

denied there was anything wrong but where I continued to find—

Oh Adelaide, I'll search all the rooms that have made this house a labyrinth of unholy ciphers. But foremost has it been an infernal conservatory of blasphemous illumination—with me its dull pupil! And you, my classmate, my instructress, my guide in the ways of estrangement: What is the lesson now? Where are the tones of your learned voice? Where—

No, it is not true. That is not you, your voice I hear calling from up there.

Allan, I am here.

Not from your own room, which was the very first place I searched.

Hurry, Allan, hurry.

Adelaide!

No, you cannot be here. You cannot be standing behind this door.

Yes, my brother. Come closer and welcome your sister on her return.

Adelaide, your white nightgown; the blood. Please forgive me, sister. I cannot even explain to you—I felt…

All alone, I know. And betrayed. Lost and lonely Allan. You were always alone, my brother, and so was I. It could never have been otherwise. I know how my lies have hurt you, and what they drove you to do. But none of that matters now, none of that ever mattered, for if we could not truly share our lives then at least we always shared a soul, did we not? That is the only thing, despite all the masks and mirrors and whatever it was we thought we were. So many things we could not share until now. Now I can

share with you the most precious thing of all… I will share my death. Come to me and share my death. Yes, closer. Do not think about the blood, it is both of ours. Now even closer. See how your blood flows with mine.

Your blood is inside me.
And yours in me. We share a soul, my brother. We share a soul.

Adelaide.
Al*lan*.

SILENCE.

Charnelhouse Of The Moon (2011 Noctuary Version)

First published in *Punk-Surrealist Cafe #6*, 1981

Transfixed hilarity was his first but certainly not his only reaction when from a hidden bed of shadows he gazed upon the place and its curious workings. He had journeyed too long to this fairytale land to be sated by that feeling alone. Many more novel sensations were promised to one whose degenerate sensibility led him from moon to crystal-dusted moon until he reached that fleshy mound which stood out from the void like a chunk of bloody meat among a sprinkling of diamonds.

It was just as the thin voices told him. There, he strolled as through a rainbow splashed with all the shades of open wounds, dripping with radiance against the blackness beyond the footlights of autopsies. With little skips he leapt over streams, open veins that flowed so slowly yet chuckled withal. Their waters were viscous, perhaps overly so for him to take refreshment from them. But he could let that go for now. He was allowing himself to get sidetracked on the way to his ultimate destination. And there it was: the distinguished thing.

It seemed no more than a big box of boards soaring like a mountain with black clouds roiling about its summit. At its base it was cheaply buttressed by long planks that leaned against wooden walls like resting watchmen. He entered unseen amid darkness and confusion and the sounds of labor.

To put it plainly, the place was everything he was told it would be—a visionary's slaughterhouse, its imagery taken from a book of morbid myths and legends. And it was then that transfixed hilarity began to overtake him.

Held within wired corrals, the beasts stood uniformly docile and made no audible sounds. To his hearing, however, their very silence seemed a kind of music, a sterile harmony as pure as the whiteness of their hides and their immaculate manes. And they all remained without the least spattering from the gloomy filth that seemed to be everywhere, even rising from the ground as a dirty gray steam, foul ghosts floating along the floor.

Marauding through the greasy haze were huge men clad in nothing but long, black, rubbery aprons. Their faces were bestial, and they moved with plodding deliberation. Still, the pristinely pale creatures obeyed them without a struggle, glancing shyly when the gory mallet came down and smashed them between the eyes, right below the spot where a spiraled horn projected from their foreheads. The gods, he imagined, had no uncertain use for such well-formed cornua. Without delay, the butchers separated these appendages from the fallen carcasses. They snapped off easily, like icicles.

He then watched the flaying of the flesh and the hanging of the coats along the walls. What royal robes they would make! And the animals' meat was as perfectly pink as their outer coverings were white. This was the ideal fare for one not accustomed to gross nourishment. O where among the moons of the universe were they bound?

But what a scandal the way the processing was handled, the way grappling hooks came down from high above and

brusquely lifted the carnal heaps into the blackness. Was there even a roof to this coliseum of carnage, or did the eye gaze upwards to see deep into the well of the abyss? His fair eyelashes fluttered with dreams and curiosity. Then his reverie was brought to an end, crudely interrupted. And transfixed hilarity, leaping toward hysteria, was but a fraction of what he felt.

Well, now, what have we got here, brothers, said one of the big boys in a black apron, massaging his thick and grizzled cheeks in a parody of thoughtfulness. The others gathered around, some carrying monstrous mallets and others caressing the blades of sharp instruments. They sniggered unambiguously. They nodded. They whispered among themselves.

And finally he realized the sort of place he was in. This was no citadel from a fairy tale for the depraved where he would be welcomed with hearty laughter, not a fastness of shared indulgence in degradation. Now he knew what was going to happen to him.

The massive figures hefted their tools, closing in. And he laughed a little, for at that moment transfixed hilarity was not entirely absent from his perception of this pageant… and the featured role he was about to play.

Charnelhouse Of The Moon (1989 Crypt Of Cthulhu Version)

First published in *Punk-Surrealist Cafe #6*, 1981

Entranced hilarity was perhaps his first but certainly not his only reaction when from a hidden bed of shadows he gazed upon the place and its curious workings. He had journeyed far too far merely for that. And truly novel sensations were rare enough without diluting them in the swill of banal combinations. Much, much more, he had heard, awaited one who would go down from the moon's crystal-dusted mirror of dreams and travel to that fleshy mound which stood out from the void like a chunk of fresh meat set redly within a diamond. There, they said with voices thin and fine as the air of imagination, you may roll your eyes in a *living* mirror and leave your lunar immunity to such things... behind. It is our reflecting reservoir, so the speak, where a graveyard has sunk low into the muck. Oh, we *envisage* it endlessly in our cerebral exploits of the cosmic macabre; but go, go there if you must, and see.

He did see, after arduously strolling across a landscape colored in a rainbow of open wounds, radiant against the blackness that waits beyond the footlights of stark autopsies. With a little skip he leapt over streams, their translucence divided into a veinwork of tributaries, viscous but still chuckling through crow-footed ruts. He was tempted to

drink from these, never having refreshed himself with anything so palpable; but this was a minor delight and he should save its savoring as a final consolation should his destination disappoint him in more ways than he could reasonably expect. And here, at last in truth it was: the distinguished thing.

It seemed no more than a big box of boards soaring like a mountain where gleaming black clouds roil about the summit. It was cheaply buttressed at its base by long planks which leaned against the walls like unvigilant watchmen. Other comparisons he could easily have conjured but needed to conserve his imagination for the no doubt inspiring feast inside the amazing structure. He entered unseen amid darkness and confusion and sounds of labor.

Entranced hilarity was perhaps his first but certainly not his only reaction when from a hidden bed of shadows he gazed upon the place and its curious workings. Complex hybrids and cross-breeds of sentiments were born from each strange menage of mind, emotions and senses. So this was what it was like to live outside the austere atmosphere of the lunar visionary—to, in fact, live at all in any proper sense of the word. The place, to put it plainly and without the evocations of vagueness, was... was something quite similar in principle to what a complete outsider's conception of a slaughterhouse might be. The beasts themselves did not make any audible sound, standing uniformly docile, cornered in fragile corrals. To his hearing, however, their very silence seemed a kind of music, a sterile harmony as pure as the white of their hides, the white lines of their elegant necks and glossy manes. And they all remained un-

spattered despite the gloomy filth that seemed to be everywhere, even rising from the ground as a gray ghost of steam.

Marauding through the greasy haze were huge men who were apparently clad in nothing but long, black, rubbery aprons. Their faces were parodies of divinities of apes. They moved with graceless deliberation (his exact impression was more expansively articulated), as if they were being just adequately manipulated by powers in themselves more stealthy. Still, the pristinely pale creatures obeyed them without a struggle, glancing upwards a little shyly at the last moment when the gory mallet came down and smashed them between the eyes, right below the spot where a spiraled horn projected from their sweatless foreheads. The gods, he imagined, had no uncertain uses for such well-formed cornua. Without delay the butchers separated these appendages from the fallen carcasses. They appeared to snap off easily, like icicles.

He then watched the flaying of the carcasses and the hanging of the hides along the wall like old coats. What royal stoles these would make! he thought, for a monarch of the imagination. And the creatures' meat was laid bare: an inner pink as perfect as their outer white. (It was all so exciting, he gasped inwardly in the shadows.) The ideal fare for one not accustomed to gross nourishment. But what a scandal the way the processing was handled, the way hooks came down from high above and brusquely lifted the pretty flesh into the blackness. Was there even a roof to this colosseum of butchery, or did the eye glancing upwards see far over the walls and deep into the old, old well of the abyss? His fair eyelashes fluttered with dreams and curiosity, a cornucopia of universal figures and fancy images. Then his reverie was

brought to an end, quite crudely interrupted; and entranced hilarity, leaping towards hysteria, was only a small part of what he felt.

Well now, look what we got here, brothers, said one of the big boys in black apron, massaging his meaty and enbristled cheeks in a fairytale parody of thoughtfulness. The others gathered around, some carrying monstrous mallets and others caressing the blades of surgically sharp instruments. They chuckled unambiguously. They nodded. They whispered among themselves. (A simple style is best now.) They watched one of his pale, slender hands wipe something from his taut brow. He then stared at his open hand as though at something he had never seen or imagined. And then he realized the sort of place he was in: that the filthy glamor of it was just a disguise for another place which was without light or air—a jewel-hard darkness. A place he could never know in the way he really wanted. And he realized what was going to happen to him now. The massive figures hefted their tools, closing in. And he laughed a little, for at that moment entranced hilarity was not entirely absent from his perception of this pageant… and the obscure but demanding role he was about to play.

Les Fleurs (2010 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

First published in *Dark Horizons* #23, 1981

April 17th. Flowers sent out in the **early** a.m.

May 1st. Today—and I thought it would never happen again—I have met someone about whom, I think, I can be hopeful. Her name is Daisy. She works in a florist shop! *The* florist shop, I might add, where I paid a visit to gather some sorrowful flowers for Clare, who to the rest of the world is still a missing person. At first, of course, Daisy was politely reserved when I asked about some lilting blossoms for a loved one's memorial. I soon cured her, however, of this detached manner. In my deeply shy and friendly tone of voice I asked about some of the other flowers in the shop, ones having no overtones of loss. She was quite glad to take me on a tour of the shop's iridescent inventory. I confessed to knowing next to nothing about commercial plants and things, and remarked on her enthusiasm for her work, hoping all the while that at least part of her animation was inspired by me. “Oh, I love working with flowers,” she said. “I think they're real interesting.” Then she asked if I was aware that there were plants having flowers which opened only at night, and that certain types of violets bloomed only in darkness underground. My inner flow of thoughts and sensations suddenly quickened. Though I had already sensed she was a girl of

special imagination, this was the first hint I received of just how special it was. I judged my efforts to know her better would not be wasted, as they have been with others. “That is real interesting about those flowers,” I said, smiling a hot-house warm smile. There was a pause which I filled in with my name. She then told me hers. “Now what kind of flowers would you like?” she asked. I staidly requested an arrangement suitable for the grave of a departed grandmother. Before leaving the shop I told Daisy I might need to stop by again to satisfy some future floral needs. She seemed to have no objection to this. With the vegetation nestled in my arm I songfully walked out of the store. I then proceeded directly to Chapel Gardens cemetery. For a while I sincerely made an effort to find a headstone that might by coincidence display my lost one's name. And any dates would just have to do. I thought she deserved this much at least. As events transpired, however, the recipient of my commemorative bouquet had to be someone named Clarence.

May 16th. Day, as I now intimately called her, visited my apartment for the first time and fell in love with its quaint refurbishments. “I adore well-preserved old places,” she said. It seemed to me she really did. I thought she would. She remarked what decorative wonders a few plants would do for my ancient rooms. She was obviously sensitive to the absence of natural adornments in my bachelor quarters. “Night-blooming cereuses?” I asked, trying not to mean too much by this and give myself away. A mild grin appeared on her face, but it was not an issue I thought I could press at the time. Even now I press it within these scrapbook pages with great delicacy.

Day wandered about the apartment for a while. I watched her as I would some exotic animal—a sleek ocelot perhaps. Then suddenly I realized I had regrettably overlooked something. She looked it over. The object was positioned on a low table before a high window and between its voluminous curtains. It seemed so vulgarly prominent to me then, especially since I hadn't intended to let her see anything of this sort so early in our relationship. “What is this?” she asked, her voice expressing a kind of outraged curiosity bordering on plain outrage. “It's just a sculpture. I told you I do things like that. It's not very good. Kind of dumb.” She examined the piece more closely. “Watch that,” I warned. She let out a little “Ow.” “Is it supposed to be some type of cactus?” she inquired. For a moment she seemed to take a genuine interest in that obscure objet d'art. “It has tiny teeth,” she observed, “on these big tongue things.” They do look like tongues; I'd never thought of that. Rather ingenious comparison, considering. I hoped her imagination had found fertile ground in which to grow, but instead she revealed a moribund disgust. “You might have better luck passing it off as an animal than a plant, or a sculpture of a plant, or whatever. It's got a velvety kind of fur and looks like it might crawl away.” I felt like crawling away myself at that point. I asked her, as a quasi-botanist, if there were not plants resembling birds and other animal life. This was my feeble attempt to exculpate my creation from any charges of unnaturalness. It's strange how you're sometimes forced to assume an unsympathetic view of yourself through borrowed eyes. Finally I mixed some drinks and we went on to other things. I put on some music.

Soon afterward, though, the bland harmony of the music was undermined by an unfortunate dissonance. That detective (Briceberg, I think) arrived for an encore of his interrogation re: The Clare Affair. Fortunately I was able to keep him and his questions out in the hallway the entire time. We reviewed the previous dialogue we'd had. I reiterated to him that Clare was just someone I worked with and with whom I was professionally friendly. It appears that some of my coworkers, unidentified, suspected that Clare and I were romantically involved. “Office gossip,” I countered, knowing she was one girl who knew how to keep certain secrets, even if she could not be trusted with others. Sorry, I said, I had no idea where she could have disappeared to. I did manage to subversively hint, however, that I would not be surprised if in a sudden flight of neurotic despair she had impulsively relocated to some land of her heart's desire. I myself had despaired to find that within Clare's dark and promisingly moody borders lay a disappointing dreamland of white picket fences and flower-printed curtains. No, I didn't tell that to the detective. Besides, I further contended, it was well known in the office that Clare had begun dating someone approximately seven to ten days (my personal estimation of the term of her disloyalty) before her disappearance. So why bother me? This, I found out, was the reason: he had also been informed, he told me, of my belonging to a certain offbeat organization. I replied there was nothing offbeat in serious philosophical study. Furthermore, I was an artist, as he well knew, and, as anybody knows, artistic personalities have a perfectly natural tendency toward such things. I thought he would understand if I put it that way. He did. The man appeared satisfied with my every state-

ment. Indeed, he seemed overly eager to dismiss me as a person of interest in the case, no doubt trying to create a false sense of security on my part and lead me to make an unwitting admission to the foulest kind of play. “Was that about the girl where you work who disappeared?” Daisy asked me afterward. “Mm-hm,” I noised. I was brooding and silent for a while, hoping she would attribute this to my inward lament for that strange girl at the office and not to the lamentably imperfect evening we'd had. “Maybe I'd better go,” she said, and then did. There was not much of our date left to salvage anyway. After she abandoned me I got very drunk on a liqueur tasting of flowers from open fields, or so it seemed. I also took this opportunity to reread a story about some men who visit the white waste regions of a polar wonderland. I don't expect to dream tonight, having already sated myself with this arctic fantasy. Brotherhood of Paradise offbeat indeed!

September 21st. Day came up to the cool, clean offices of G. R. Glacy, the advertising firm for which I worked, to meet me for lunch. I showed her my cubicle of commercial artistry, and drew her attention to my latest project. “Oh, that's lovely,” she said when I pointed out the drawing of a nymph with flowers in her freshly shampooed hair. “That's really nice.” That “nice” remark almost spoiled my day. I asked her to look closely at the flowers mingling in the locks of the mythical being. It was barely noticeable that one of the flower stems was growing out of, or perhaps into, the creature's head. Day didn't seem to appreciate the craftiness of my craft very much. And I thought we were making such progress along “offbeat” paths. (Damn that Briceberg!) Perhaps I should wait until we return from our trip before

showing her any of the paintings I have hidden at my home. I want her to be prepared. Everything is all prepared for our vacation at least. Day finally found someone to take care of her cat.

October 10th. Good-bye diary. See you when I get back.

November 1st. After a period of ruminative silence on the subject, I will now set down a brief chapter from Day's and my tropical sojourn. I'm not sure whether the events to be delineated represent an impasse or a turning point in the course of our relationship. Perhaps there is some point that I have completely failed to get. As yet, I am still in the dark. I've been here before with Clare and had hoped that my escapist interlude with Day would be definitive, or close to it, and not filled with dubiety. Nevertheless, I still feel that the episode to follow deserves documentation.

A Hawaiian paradise at midnight. Actually we were just gazing upon the beachside luxuriance from our hotel veranda. Day was tipsy from consuming several drinks that wore flowers on their foamy heads. I was in a condition similar to hers. A few moments of heady silence passed, punctuated by an occasional sigh from Day. We heard the flapping of invisible wings whipping the warm air in darkness. We listened closely to the sounds of black orchids growing, even if there were none. (“Mmmm,” hummed Day.) We were ripe for a whim. I had one, not knowing yet if I could pull it off. “Can you smell the mysterious cereus?” I said, placing one hand on her far shoulder and dramatically passing the other in a horizontal arc before the jungle beyond. “Can you?” I hypnotically repeated. “I can,” said a game Day. “But can we find them, Day, and watch them open in the moonlight?” “We can, we can,” she chanted giddily. We could. Suddenly

the smooth-skinned leaves of the night garden were brushing against our smooth-skinned selves. Day paused to touch a flower that was orange or red but smelled of a deep violet. I encouraged her to press on across the flower-bedded earth. We plunged deeper into the dream garden. Faster, faster, faster the sounds and smells rushed by us. It was easier than I thought. At some point, with almost no effort at all, I successfully managed our full departure from known geography. “Day, Day,” I shouted. “We're here. I've never shown this to anyone, and what torture it's been keeping it from you. No, don't speak. Look, look.” Oh, the thrill of bringing a romantic companion to this dark paradise. How I yearned to show her this resplendent world in full bloom and have her behold it with ensorcelled delight. She was somewhere near me in the darkness. I waited, seeing her a thousand ways in my mind before actually gazing at the real Day. I looked. “What's wrong with the stars, the sky?” was all she said. She was trembling.

At breakfast the next morning I subtly probed her for impressions and judgments of the night before. But she was badly hung over and had only a chaotic recall of what she had experienced. Well, at least she didn't go into hysterics, as did my old flame Clare.

Since our return I have been working on a painting entitled “Sanctum Obscurum.” Though I have done this kind of work many times before, I am including in this one elements that I hope will stir Day's memory and precipitate a conscious recollection of not only a certain night in the islands but of all the subtle and not so subtle messages I have tried to communicate to her. I only pray she will understand.

November 14th. Stars of disaster! Earthly, not unearthly, asters are what Day's heart craves. She is too much a lover of natural flora to be anything else. I know this now. I showed her the painting, and even imagined she was excited about seeing it. But I think she was just waiting to see what kind of fool I would make of myself. She sat on the sofa, scraping her lower lip with a nervous forefinger. Opposite her I let a velvet cloth drop. She looked up as if there had been a startling noise. I was not wholly satisfied with the painting myself, but this exhibition was designed to serve an extra-aesthetic purpose. I searched her eyes for a reflection of understanding, a ripple of empathetic insight. “Well?” I asked, the necessity of the word tolling doom. Her gaze told me all I needed to know, and the fatal clarity of the message was reminiscent of another girl I once knew. She gave me a second chance, looking at the picture with a theatrical scrutiny.

The picture itself? An interior done up very much like my own apartment—a refuge crowding about a window of a disproportionate breadth, so as to direct the viewer's sight telescopically outward. Beyond the window is a vista wholly alien to terrestrial nature and perhaps to all that we deem human. Outside is a gorgeous kingdom of glittering colors and velvety jungle-shapes, a realm of contorted rainbows and twisted auroras. Hyper-radiant hues are calmed by the glass, so that their strange intensity does not threaten the chromatic integrity of the world within. Some stars, colored from the most spectral part of the spectrum, blossom in the high darkness. The outer world glistens in stellar light and is mirrored by gleams from within each labyrinthine form. And upon the window's surface is the watery reflection of a lone figure gazing out at this otherworldly paradise.

“Of course, it's very good,” she observed. “Very realistic.”

Not at all, Daisy Day. Not realistic in either manner or matter.

Some uncomfortable moments later Day told me she had a prior engagement and was running late. It seemed she had made girl plans with a girlfriend of hers to do some girly things girls do when they get together with others of their kind. I said I understood, and I did. There is no doubt in my mind of the gender of Day's companion this night, and perhaps other nights I did not know about. But it was for a different reason that I was distressed to see her go. Something that I could read in her every move and expression, something I have seen before, gave away her suspicions about me and my private life. Of course, she already knew about the meetings I attend and all such things. I've even paraphrased and abridged for her the discussion which goes on at these gatherings, always obscuring their real meaning in progressively more transparent guises, hoping one day to show her the naked truth. Like Clare, however, Day has prematurely learned too much of the truth about me and the others. And I fear she may decide to relay her inside information to the wrong people. The dogged Detective Briceberg, for instance.

November 16th. Tonight we held an emergency meeting, our assembly in crisis. The others feel there's a problem, and of course I know they're right. Ever since I met my latest love I could sense their growing uneasiness, which was their prerogative. Now, however, all has changed; my romantic misjudgment has seen to that. They expressed absolute horror that an outsider should know so much. I feel it myself. Day is a stranger now, and I wonder what her loquacious self might disclose about her former friend, not to mention his

present ones. A marvelous arcana is threatened with exposure. The inconspicuousness we need for our lives could be lost, and with it would go the keys to a strange kingdom.

We've confronted these situations before. I'm not the only one to have jeopardized our secrecy. We, of course, have no secrets from each other. They know everything about me, and I about them. They knew every step of the way the progress of my relationship with Daisy. Some of them even predicted the outcome. And though I thought I was right in taking the chance that they were wrong, I must now defer to their prophecy. Those lonely souls, *mes frères!* "Do you want us to see it through?" they asked in so many words. I consented, finally, in a score of ambiguous, half-hesitant ways. Then they sent me back to my unflowered sanctum.

I'll never again get involved in another situation of this kind, I promised myself, even though I've made this resolution before. I stared at the razory dentes of my furry sculpture for a perilously long while. What that poor girl saw as tongue-like floral appendages were silent: the preservation of such silence, of course, is their whole purpose. I remember that Daisy once jokingly asked me on what I modeled my art.

November 17th.

To Eden with me you will not leave

To live in a cottage of crazy crooked

eaves.

In your own happy home you take care

these nights;

When you let your little cat in, please

turn on the lights!

Something scurries behind and finds

a cozy place to stare,

Something sent to you from paradise,

with serpents to spare:

Tongues flowering; they leap out

laughing, lapping. Disappear!

I do this to pass the hours. Only to pass the hours.
November 17th. 12:00 a.m. Flowers.

Les Fleurs (1989 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

First published in *Dark Horizons* #23, 1981

April 17th. Flowers sent out today in the early a.m.

May 1st. Today—and I thought it would never happen again—I have met someone about whom, I think, I can be hopeful. Her name is Daisy. She works in a florist shop! *The* florist shop, I might add, where I quietly paid a visit to gather some sorrowful flowers for Clare, who to the rest of the world is still a missing person. At first, of course, Daisy was politely reserved when I asked about some lilting blossoms for a loved one's memorial. I soon cured her, however, of this unnecessarily detached manner. In my deeply shy and friendly tone of voice I asked about some of the other flowers in the shop, ones having nothing to do with loss, if not everything to do with gain. She was quite glad to take me on a trumped-up tour of hyacinths and hibiscuses. I confessed to knowing next to nothing about commercial plants and things, and remarked on her enthusiasm for this field of study, hoping all the while that at least part of her animation was inspired by me. “Oh, I love working with flowers,” she said. “I think they're real interesting.” Then she asked if I was aware that there were plants having flowers which opened only at night, and that certain types of violets bloomed only in darkness underground. My inner flow of

thoughts and sensations suddenly quickened. Though I had already sensed she was a girl of special imagination, this was the first hint I received of just how special it was. I judged my efforts to know her better would not be wasted, as they have been with others. “That *is* real interesting about those flowers,” I said, smiling a hothouse warm smile. There was a pause which I filled in with my name. She then told me hers. “Now what kind of flowers would you like?” she asked. I sedately requested an arrangement suitable for the grave of a departed grandmother. Before leaving the shop I told Daisy I might need to stop by again to satisfy some future floral needs. She seemed to have no objection to this. With the vegetation nestled in my arm I songfully walked out of the store. I then proceeded directly to Chapel Gardens cemetery. For a while I sincerely made the effort to find a headstone that might by coincidence be my lost one's name. And any dates would just have to do. I thought she deserved this much at least. As events transpired, however, the recipient of my floral memorial had to be someone named Clarence.

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watched her, seeing the place with new eyes. Then suddenly I realized I had regrettably overlooked something. She looked it over. The object was positioned on a low table before a high window and between its voluminous curtains. It seemed so vulgarly prominent to me then, especially since I hadn't intended to let her see anything of this sort so early in our friendship. “What *is* this?” she asked, her voice expressing a kind of outraged curiosity bordering on plain outrage. “It's just a sculpture. I told you I do things like that. It's not very good. Kind of dumb.” She examined the piece more closely. “Watch that,” I warned. She let out a tiny, unserious “Ow.” “Is it supposed to be some type of cactus?” she inquired. For a moment she seemed to take a genuine interest in that obscure objet d'art. “It has little teeth,” she observed, “on these big tongue things.” They do look like tongues, I never thought of that. Rather ingenious comparison, considering. I hoped her imagination had found fertile ground in which to grow, but instead she revealed a moribund disgust. “You might have better luck passing it off as an animal than a plant, or a sculpture of a plant, or whatever. It's got a velvety kind of fur and looks like it might crawl away.” I felt like crawling away myself at that point. I asked her, as a quasi-botanist, if there were not plants resembling birds and other animal life. This was my feeble attempt to exculpate my creation from my charges of unnaturalness. It's strange how you're sometimes forced to assume an unsympathetic view of yourself through borrowed eyes. Finally I mixed some drinks and we went on to other things. I put on some music.

Soon afterward, however, the bland harmony of the music was undermined by an unfortunate dissonance. That detective (Briceberg, I think) arrived for an unexpected encore

of his interrogation re: the Clare affair. Fortunately I was able to keep him and his questions out in the hallway the entire time. We reviewed the previous dialogue we'd had. I reiterated to him that Clare was just someone I worked with and with whom I was professionally friendly. It appears that some of my co-workers, unidentified, suspect that Clare and I were romantically involved. “Office gossip,” I countered, knowing she was one girl who knew how to keep certain secrets, even if she could not be trusted with others. No, I said, I definitely had no idea where she could have disappeared to. I did manage to subversively hint, however, that I would not be surprised if in a sudden flight of neurotic despair she had impulsively relocated in some land of her heart's desire. I myself had despaired to find that within Claire's dark and promisingly moody borders lay a disappointing dreamland of white picket fences and flower-printed curtains. No, I didn't tell that to the detective. Besides, I further argued, it was well known in the office that Clare had begun dating someone approximately seven to ten days (my personal estimation of the term of her disloyalty) before her disappearance. So why bother me? This, I found out, was the reason: he had also been informed, he informed me, of my belonging to a certain offbeat organization. I replied there was nothing offbeat in philosophical study; furthermore, I was an artist, as he well knew, and, as anybody knows, artistic personalities have a perfectly natural tendency toward such things. I thought he would understand if I put it that way. He did. The man appeared satisfied with my every statement. Indeed, he seemed overly eager to dismiss me as a suspect in the case, no doubt trying to create a false sense of security on my part and lead me to make an unwit-

ting admission to the foulest kind of play. “Was that about the girl in your office?” Daisy asked me afterward. “Mm-hm,” I noised. I was brooding and silent for a while, hoping she would attribute this to my inward lament for that strange girl at the office and not the lamentably imperfect evening we'd had. “Maybe I'd better go,” she said, and very soon did. There was not much of our date left to salvage anyways. After she abandoned me I got very drunk on a liqueur tasting of flowers from open fields, or so it seemed. I also took this opportunity to reread a story about some men who visit the white waste regions of a polar wonderland. I don't expect to dream tonight, having already sated myself with this frigid fantasy. Brotherhood of Paradise offbeat indeed!

September 21st. Day came up to the cool, clean offices of G. R. Glacy, the advertising house of whores and horrors, to meet me for lunch. I introduced her around the department to the few people I get along with, and definitely not those vicious copy-slingers who spread rumors about me. I also showed her my little corner of commercial artistry, including my latest project. “Oh, that's lovely,” she said when I pointed out the drawing of a nymph with flowers in her freshly shampooed hair. “That's really nice.” That “nice” remark almost spoiled my day. I asked her to look closely at the flowers mingling freshly in the fresh locks of this mythical being. It was barely noticeable that one of the flower stems was growing out of, or perhaps into, the creature's head. Day didn't seem to appreciate the craftiness of my craft very much. And I thought we were making such progress along “offbeat” paths. (Damn that Briceberg!) Perhaps I should wait until we return from our trip before showing her any of my paintings. I want her to be prepared.

Everything is all prepared for our vacation, at least; Day finally found someone to take care of the cat who shares her flat.

October 10th. Good-bye diary. See you when I get back.

November 1st. With ecstasy and exasperation, I here record a particular episode from Day's and my tropical sojourn. I'm not sure whether the following adventure represents an impasse or a turning point in the course of our relationship. Perhaps there is some point that I have failed to entirely get. As yet I am, not surprisingly, in the dark. Here, nevertheless, is a fragment from our escapist interlude.

An Hawaiian paradise at midnight. Actually we were just gazing upon the beachside luxuriance from our hotel veranda. Day was bemused by several exotic drinks that wore flowers on their foamy heads. I was in a condition similar to hers. A few moments of heady silence passed, punctuated by an occasional sigh from Day. We heard the flapping of invisible wings whipping the warm air in darkness. We listened closely to the sounds of black orchids growing, even if there were none. “Mmmm,” hummed Day. We were ripe for a whim. I had one, not knowing yet if I could pull it thoroughly off. “Can you smell the mysterious cereus?” I asked, placing one hand on her far shoulder and dramatically passing the other in a horizontal arc before the jungle beyond. “Can you?” I hypnotically repeated. “I can,” said a game Day. “But can we find them, Day, and watch them open in the moonlight?” “We can, we can,” she chanted giddily. We could. Suddenly the smooth-skinned leaves of the night garden were brushing against our smooth-skinned selves. Day paused to touch a flower that was orange or red but smelled of a deep violet.

I encouraged us to press on across the flower-bedded earth. We plunged deeper into the dream garden. Faster, faster, faster the sounds and smells rushed by us. It was easier than I thought. At some point, with almost no effort at all, I successfully managed our full departure from known geography. “Day, Day,” I shouted in the initial confusion and excitement. “We're here. I've never shown this to anyone. It's been such a torturous secret, Day. I've wanted to tell you for so long, and show you. No, don't speak. Look, look.” Oh, the thrill of seeing this dark paradise with new eyes. With doubled intensity would I now see my world. My world. She was somewhere near me in the darkness. I waited, seeing her a thousand ways in my mind before actually gazing at the real Day. I looked. “What's wrong with the stars, the sky?” was all she said. She was trembling.

At breakfast the next morning I subtly probed her for impressions and judgments of the night before. But she was badly hung over and had only a chaotic recall of the previous night. Oh, well.

Since our return I have been working on a painting titled “Sanctum Obscurum.” Though I have done this kind of work many times before, I am including in this one elements that I hope will stir Day's memory and precipitate a conscious recollection of not only a certain night in the islands but all of the subtle and not so subtle messages I have tried to communicate to her. I only pray she will understand.

November 4th. Stars of disaster! Earthly, and not unearthly asters are all that fill Day's heart with gladness. She is too much of a lover of natural flora to be anything else, I know this now. I showed her the painting, and even imagined she anticipated seeing it with some excitement. But I

think she was just anxiously waiting to see what kind of fool I would make of myself. She sat on the sofa, scraping her lower lip with a nervous forefinger. Opposite her I let a little cloth drop. She looked up as if there had been a startling noise. I was not wholly satisfied with the painting myself, but this exhibition was designed to serve an extra-aesthetic purpose. I searched her eyes for a reflection of understanding, a ripple of empathetic insight. “Well?” I asked, the necessity of the word tolling doom. Her gaze told me all I needed to know, and the fatal clarity of the message was reminiscent of another girl I once knew. She gave me a second chance, looking at the picture with a theatrical scrutiny. The picture itself? An inner refuge, cozily crowding about the periphery of a central window of leaded glass. The interior beams with a honeyed haze, as of light glowing evenly through a patterned tapestry. Beyond the window, too, is a sanctuary of sorts, but not of man or terrestrial nature. Outside is an opulent kingdom of glittering colors and velvety jungle-shapes, a realm of contorted rainbows and twisted auroras. Hyper-radiant hues are calmed by the glass, so that their strange intensity does not threaten the chromatic integrity of the world within. Some stars, coloured from the most spectral part of the spectrum, blossom in the high darkness. The outer world glistens in stellar light and also gleams with labyrinthine glare inside each twisted form. And upon the window's surface is the watery reflection of a lone figure gazing out at this unearthly paradise.

“Of course, it's very good,” she observed. “Very realistic.”

Not at all, Daisy Day. Not realistic in the least.

Some uncomfortable moments later I found out she had to be leaving. It seemed she had made girl plans with a girl-

friend of hers to do some things girls do when they get together with others of their kind. I said I understood, and I did. There was no doubt in my mind of the gender of Day's companion this evening. But it was for a different reason that I was distressed to see her go. Tonight marks the first time, and this I could read in her every move and expression, that she was truly possessed a sure knowledge of my secrets. Of course, she already knew about the meetings I attend and all such things. I've even paraphrased and abridged for her the discussion which goes on at these gatherings, always obscuring their real nature in progressively more transparent guises, hoping one day to show her the naked truth. And now, I think, the secret has been stripped bare. Whether she believes them or not, which doesn't make any difference, she has as clear a notion as Clare ever did of the fabulous truth about me and the others. She has positively gotten the picture now.

November 16th. Tonight we held an emergency meeting, our assembly in crisis. The others feel there's a problem, and of course I know they're right. Ever since I met that girl I could sense their growing uneasiness, which was their prerogative. Now, however, all has changed; my romantic misjudgment has seen to that. They expressed absolute horror that an outsider should know so much. I feel it myself. Day is a stranger now, and I wonder what her loquacious self might disclose about her former friend, not to mention his present ones. The secretness we need for our lives could be lost, and with it would go the keys to a strange kingdom.

We've confronted these situations before, and I'm not the only one to have jeopardized our secrecy. We, of course, have no secrets from each other.

They know everything about me, and I about them. They knew every step of the way my relationship with Daisy. Some of them even predicted the outcome. And though I thought I was right in taking the extravagant chance they were wrong, I must now defer to their prophecy. Those lonely souls, *mes frères*! "Do you want us to see it through?" they asked in so many words. I consented, finally, in a score of ambiguous, half-hesitant ways. Then they sent me back to my unflowered sanctum. I'll never do this again, I thought, even though I've made this resolution before. I stared at the razory dentes of my furry sculpture for a perilously long while. What that poor girl saw as tonguelike floral appendages were silent: the preservation of such silence, of course, is their whole purpose. I remember that Daisy once jokingly asked me on what I modeled my art...

November 17th.

To Eden with me you will not leave
To live in a cottage of crazy crooked eaves.
In your own happy home you take care these nights;
When you let your little cat in, turn on the lights!
Something scurries behind and finds a cozy place to stare,
Something sent to you from paradise, paradisically so rare:
Tongues flowering; they leap out laughing, lapping. Disappear!

I do this to pass the hours. Only to pass the hours.

November 17th. 12.00 a.m. Flowers.

Les Fleurs
(1981 Dark Horizons Version)

First published in *Dark Horizons* #23, 1981

May 1st. Today—and I thought it would never happen again—I have met someone about whom, I think, I can be hopeful. Her name is Daisy. She works in a florist shop! T*he* florist shop, I might add, where I quietly paid a visit to gather some sorrowful flowers for Clare, who to the rest of the world is still a missing person. At first, of course, Daisy was politely reserved when I asked about some lilting blossoms for a loved one's memorial. I soon cured her, however, of this unnecessarily detached manner. In my deeply shy and friendly tone of voice I asked about some of the other flowers in the shop, ones having nothing to do with loss, if not everything to do with gain. She was quite glad to take me on a trumped up tour of hyacinths and hibiscuses. I confessed to knowing next to nothing about commercial plants and things, and remarked on her enthusiasm for the study, hoping all the while that at least part of her animation was on account of me. “Oh, I love working with flowers,” she said. “I think they're real interesting.” Then she asked that did I know there were plants having flowers which opened only at night, and that certain types of violets bloomed only in darkness underground. My inner flow of thoughts and sensations paused briefly. Though I had already sensed she was a girl of special imagination this, I think, was the first overt hint I received of just how special it was. I judged my efforts to know

her better would not be wasted, as they have been before. “That's real interesting about those flowers,” I said, smiling a hothouse warm smile. There was a pause which I filled in with my name. She then told me hers. “Now what kind of flowers would you like,” she asked. I sedately requested an arrangement suitable for the grave of a long late grandmother. Before leaving the shop I told Daisy I might need to stop by again to satisfy some future floral needs. She seemed to have no objection to this. With the vegetation nestled in my arm I songfully walked out of the store. I then proceeded directly to Chapel Gardens cemetary. For a while I sincerely made the effort to find a headstone that might by coincidence display my lost one's name. And any dates would just have to do. I thought she deserved this much at least. As things transpired however, the recipient of my floral memorial had to be someone named Clarence.

May 16th. Daisy visited my apartment for the first time and fell in love with its quaint refurbishments. “I adore well-preserved old places,” she said. It seemed to me she really did. I thought she would. She remarked what decorative wonders a few plants, hanging and otherwise, would do for the ancient rooms. She was obviously sensitive to the absence of natural adornments in my bachelor quarters. “Night-blooming cereuses?” I asked, trying not to mean too much by this and give myself away. A mild grin appeared on her face, but it was not an issue I thought I could press at the time, and even now I only delicately press it within these scrapbook pages. She wandered about the apartment some more. I watched her, seeing the place with new eyes. Then suddenly I realised I had regrettably overlooked something. She looked it over. The object was positioned on a low table

before a high window and between its voluminous curtains. It seemed so vulgarly prominent to me then, especially since I hadn't intended to ler her see anything of that kind so early in our friendship. “What is this?” she asked, her voice expressing a kind of outraged curiosity bordering on plain outrage. “It's just a sculpture. I told you I do things like that. It's not very good. Kinda dumb.” She examined the piece more closely. “Watch that,” I warned. She let out a tiny, unserious “Ow.” “Is it supposed to be a kind of cactus or something?” she inquired. For a moment, a hopeful one on my part, she seemed to express a genuine interest. “It has little teeth,” she observed, “on those big tongue things.” They do look like tongues; I'd never thought of that. Rather ingenious comparison, considering. I hoped her imagination had found fertile earth and would grow, but instead she next revealed a kind of moribund disgust. “It looks more like some kind of animal than a sculpture of a plant. It's got a velvety kind of fur and looks like it might crawl away.” I felt like crawling away myself at that point. I asked her, as a quasi-botanist, if there were not plants resembling birds and other animal life. This was my feeble attempt to exculpate my creation from any charges of unnaturalness. It's strange how you're sometimes forced to take a different point of view through borrowed eyes. Finally I mixed some drinks and we went on to the other things. I put on some music.

Soon afterward, however, the bland harmony of the music was undermined by another unfortunate dissonance. The detective (Briceberg, I think) arrived for an unexpected second interview with me. Fortunately I was able to keep him and his questions out in the hallway the entire time. We reviewed the previous dialogue we'd had. I reiterated to him

that Clare was just someone I worked with and with whom I was professionally friendly. It appeared that some of my co-workers, unidentified, suspected that Clare and I were romantically involved. “Office gossip,” I countered, knowing she was one girl who knew how to keep certain secrets, even if she could not be trusted with others. She was not much else, though. No, I said, I definitely had no idea where she could have disappeared to. I did manage to subversively hint, however, that I would not be overly surprised if in a sudden flight of neurotic despair she had finally set out for her secret dreamland. I myself had despaired to find within Clare's dark and promisingly moody borders lay a disappointing dreamland of white picket fences and flower-printed curtains. No, I didn't tell that to the detective. Besides, I further argued, it was well known in the office that Clare had begun dating someone approximately seven to ten days (my personal estimation of the span of her disloyalty) before her disappearance. So why bother me? This, I found out, was the reason: he had also been informed, he informed me, of my belonging to a certain offbeat organisation. I replied that there was nothing *offbeat* in serious philosophical study; furthermore, I was an artist, as he well knew, and as anybody knows, artistic personalities have a perfectly natural tendency toward such things. I thought he would understand if I put it that way. He did. The man appeared satisfied with my every statement. Indeed, I suspect he was predisposed to be satisfied with almost anything I might have said, short of outright confession of the foulest kind of play. “Was that about the girl in your office?” Daisy asked me afterward. “Mm-hm,” I noised. I was brooding and silent for a while, hoping she would attribute this to my inward

lament for that strange girl at the office and not to the lamentably imperfect evening we'd had. “Maybe I'd better go,” she said, and very soon did. There was not much to salvage of the evening anyway. After that I got very drunk on a liqueur tasting of flowers from open fields, or so it seems. I also took this opportunity to re-read a story about some men who visit the white waste wonderlands of the polar regions. I don't expect to dream tonight, having had all I need in my frigidly dreaming wakefulness. Brotherhood of Paradise offbeat indeed!

May 21st. Day came up to the office of Glacy Regan Advertising Agency to meet me for lunch. I introduced her around the department to the few people I get along with, and definitely not to those who spread rumors about me. I showed her my little corner of commercial artistry and what I was working on. “Oh, that's lovely,” she said when she spied a picture of a nymph with flowers in her freshly-shampooed hair. “That's really nice.” That “nice” remark almost spoiled my day. I asked her to look closely at the flowers mingling freshly in the fresh locks of the nymph. It was barely noticeable that one of the flower stems was growing out of, or perhaps into, the creature's head. Day didn't seem to appreciate the craftiness of my craft very much. And I thought we were making such progress along “offbeat” paths. (Damn that Briceberg!) Perhaps I should wait until we return from our trip before showing her any of my paintings. I want her to be prepared. Everything is all prepared for our vacation, at least; Day finally found someone to take care of the cat living at her flat.

June 10th. Good-bye diary. See you when I get back.

September 1st. I remember, with pleasure and anxiety, a particular episode from Day's and my tropical sojourn. Before too many more estranging weeks have passed, I would like to take the opportunity to record this adventure. I'm not sure whether the circumstances here represent an impasse or a turning point. Perhaps there is some point that I have still to entirely get. As yet I am, not surprisingly, in the dark. Here, nevertheless, is a fragment from our vacation interlude. A Hawaiian paradise; at night. Actually we were just gazing upon the beachside luxuriance from out hotel veranda. Day was benighted by several exotic drinks that wore flowers on their foamy heads. I was in a similar condition to hers. A few moments of heady silence passed, punctuated by an occasional sigh from Day. We heard the flapping of invisible wings whipping the warm air in darkness. We listened closely to the sounds of black orchids growing, even if there were none. “Mmmmm,” hummed Day. We were ripe for a whim. I had one, not knowing yet if I could pull it thoroughly off. “Can you smell the mysterious cereus?” I asked, placing one hand on her far shoulder and dramatically passing the other in a horizontal arc before the jungle beyond. “Can you?” I hypnotically repeated. “I can,” said a game Day. “But can we find them, Day, and watch them open in the moonlight?” “We can, we can,” she chanted giddily. We could. Suddenly the smooth-skinned leaves of the night garden were brushing against our smooth-skinned selves. Day paused to touch a flower that was orange or red but smelled of a deep violet. I encouraged us to press on across the flower-bedded earth. We plunged deeper into the dream garden. Faster, faster, faster the sounds and smells rushed at us. It was easier than I thought. As some point, with almost

no effort at all, I successfully managed our full departure from known geography, and our transition from a sub- into a superlunary realm. “Day, Day,” I shouted in the initial confusion and excitement. “We're here. I've never shown this to anyone. It's been such a hard secret, Day. I've wanted to tell you for so long, and show you, show you. No, don't speak. Look, look.” The thrill, the thrill of seeing this dark paradise with new eyes. With doubled intensity would I now see my world. My world. She was somewhere near me in the darkness. I waited, seeing her a thousand ways in my mind before actually gazing at the real Day. I looked. “What's wrong with the stars, the sky?” was all she said. She was trembling.

At breakfast the next morning I subtly probed her thoughts for impressions and judgements of the night before. She was badly hung over and had only a chaotic recall of this wacky expedition we made the previous night through somebody's backyard. Oh, well.

Since our return I have been working on a painting entitled “Sanctum Obscurum”. Though I have done this kind of work many times before I am including in this one elements that I hope will stir Day's memory and precipitate a conscious recollection of not only a very particular night in the islands but of all the subtle and not so subtle hints and suggestions I have put to her in various ways throughout our friendship. I only pray she will understand.

September 14th. Stars of disaster! Earthly and not unearthly asters are all that fill Day's heart with gladness. She is too much a lover of natural flora to be anything else. I know this now. I showed her the painting, and even imagined she anticipated seeing it with some excitement. But I think she was just restless over what kind of fool I would

make of myself next. She sat on the sofa, scraping her lower lip with a nervous forefinger. Opposite her I let a little cloth drop. She looked up as if there had been a startling noise. I was not wholly satisfied with the painting myself, but this exhibition was designed to serve an extra-aesthetic purpose. I searched her eyes for a reflection of understanding, a ripple of empathetic insight. “Well?” I asked, the necessity of the word tolling doom. Her gaze told me all I needed to know, and the clarity of the message was reminiscent of another girl I knew once. She gave me a second chance, looking at the picture with a heavily theatrical scrutiny. The picture itself? An inner refuge, cozily crowding about the periphery of a central window of leaded glass. The interior beams with a honeyed haze, as of light glowing evenly through a patterned tapestry. Beyond the window too is a sanctuary of sorts, but not of man or terrestrial nature. Outside is an over-opulent kingdom of glittering, velvety jungle-shapes. Their hyper-radiant colours are calmed by the glass, so that this strange radiance contrasts with but does not threaten the chromatic integrity of the orderly world inside. Some stars, coloured from an even more spectral edge of the spectrum, blossom in the high darkness. The outer world glistens in stellar light and also gleams from within. And there is the back view of a lone figure more distinctly reflected than anything else upon the window's surface.

“Of course, it's very good. Very realistic.”

Not at all, Daisy Day. Not realistic in the least. Some uncomfortable moments after that I found out she had to be leaving. It seemed she had made girl plans with a girlfriend of hers to do some things girls do when they get together with others of their kind. I said I understood, and I did.

There was no doubt in my mind of the gender of Day's companion tonight. But it was for a different reason that I was distressed to see Day go off this evening. This is the first time, and this I could read in her every move and expression, that she has truly possessed an idea of my secrets. Of course, she always knew about the meetings I go to and all such things. I've even paraphrased and abridged for her the discussion which goes on at these gatherings, always disguising their real nature in progressively thinner guises, hoping one day to show her the naked truth. Well, tonight I think, the secret was stripped bare. Whether she believes them or not, which doesn't make any difference, she has as clear a notion as Clare ever did of all the secrets about me and the others. She has thoroughly gotten the picture now.

September 16th. Tonight was our meeting, though it was not of the regularly scheduled sort. The others feel there's a problem, and of course I know they're right. Ever since I met here I could sense a growing uneasiness, which was their prerogative. Now, however, all has changed; my stupid, romantic misjudgement has seen to that. They expressed absolute horror that an outsider should know so much. I feel it myself. Day is a stranger now, and I wonder what her loquacious self has to say about her former friend, not to mention his present ones. Many others could find out. Eventually we would have no peace. The secretness we need for our lives would be lost, and with it would go the possible keys to a poignantly hard sought kingdom. We can all feel the horror of that estrangement. We've been through this before, and I'm glad to say not only with me (Harley and his “lads”, for instance). We, of course, have no secrets from each other. The others know everything about me, and I about them.

They knew every step of the way my relationship with Daisy. Some of them even predicted the outcome. And though I thought I was right in taking the extravagant chance that they were wrong, I must now defer to their prophecy. Those lonely names, *mes frères*. “Do you want us to see it through,” they said in so many words. I nodded, finally, in a score of ambiguous, half-hesitant ways. Then they sent me home. I'll never do this again, I thought, even though I've thought this before. At home I stared at the razory dentes of my furry sculpture for a perilously long while. What she saw as tongue-like floral appendages were, of course, silent: the preservation of that silence is their whole and soulless purpose. I remember that she jokingly asked me once on what I modelled my art...

September 17th

To Eden with me you will not leave
To live in a cottage of crazy crooked
eaves.
In your own happy home you take care
these nights,
When you let your little cat in, turn
on the lights!
Something scurries behind and finds
a cozy place to stare,
Something sent to you from paradise,
paradisically so rare:
Tongues flowering; they leap out
laughing, lapping. Disappear!
I do this to pass the hours. Only to
pass the hours.
September 17th. 12:00 a.m. Flowers.

The Chymist (2010 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

First published in *Nyctalops #16*, 1981

Hello, Miss. Why, yes, as a matter of fact I *am* looking for some company this evening. My name is Simon, and you are... Rosemary. Funny, I was just daydreaming in the key of Rosicrucianism. Never mind. Please sit, and watch out for splinters on your chair, so you don't catch your dress. It appears that everything around here has come to the point of frays and splinters. But what this old place lacks in refinement of decor is amply offset by its atmosphere, don't you think? Yes, as you say, I suppose it does serve its purpose. It's a little lax as far as table service, though. I'm afraid that in the way of drinks one must procure for one's self. Thank you, I'm glad you think I have a nice way of talkin'. Now, can I get you something from the bar? All right, a beer you shall have. And do me a favor please: before I return, you will already have taken that wad of gum out of your mouth. Thank you, and I'll be back shortly with our drinks.

Here you are, Rosie, one beer from the bar. Just don't belch and we'll get along fine. I'm pleased to see you've gotten rid of your gum, though I hope you didn't swallow it. One's gut should probably remain ignorant of what it's like to accommodate bubble gum and beer in the same digestive episode. I know it's *your* gut, but I take an interest in what

gets into the workings of any human vessel. That's right—*vessel*. You want me to spell it? No, I'm not making fun of you. It's just that there are certain interactions that take place when the vessel in question is the delicate system of H. *sapiens*, as opposed to a chalice in a church or a serum vial in a laboratory. Quite so, that none-too-sterile glass in your immaculate hand is a vessel, now you've got it.

My glass? Yes, you do see a lot of red in there. I like red drinks. Created this one myself. A Red Rum Ginny, I call it. White rum, gin, pale ginger ale, and, ideally, cranberry juice, though the bartender here had to substitute some maraschino solution, which has neither the rich red color nor a fraction of the tartness of your smile. Here, take a sip. If you don't like it, say so. Yes, different is the word for it, the wellspring of its interest. Even the most faithful adherence to an established mixological formula results in some difference that can be discerned in even the most banal of cocktails, not to mention other concoctions in the alcoholic formulary. You just have to cultivate the *sensitivity* to notice that difference. Ask any wine taster. And that sensitivity may be extended to every experience in our lives. Though we may think we're doing the same old thing in the same old way day in and day out, fluctuations from the norm *are* the norm. You can't step into the same river twice, as the philosopher said. Each passing moment diverts to follow its own course from the one before, often quite strangely.

I have a very keen appreciation of *diversity*, if I do say so myself. You're smiling at my emphasis. You think you know something about me, and perhaps you do. Sharp girl! But *perversity*, as you no doubt were thinking, is only one of the

more ostentatious forms of the diverse. And diversions call the tune of the dance of life, even at the subatomic level.

Wow, you really guzzled down that bubbly beverage. Would you like another, or perhaps I can offer you something of my own invention? Yes, I have created other drinks. There's another red potation I've pioneered that's actually just a variation on a standard number. The Sweet and Sour Bloody Mary, made with high-test vodka, tonic water, sugar, a lemon slice, and ketchup. It does sound like a meal in itself at that. Very fortifying. No, sorry to spoil your joke, my fondness for crimson highballs does not extend to the vampire's neck-drawn nectar. Besides, I'm quite able to work during daylight hours.

Where? Well, I suppose I can tell you, *sub rosa*, that I'm employed by a pharmaceutical company not far from here. I'm a chemist there. Yes, really. Well, it's nice the way you could see right off that I wasn't no average guy just lookin' for some fun after a hard day's work. Perceptive girl! However, I did in fact come directly here after working a little overtime. I noticed while I was at the bar counter that you were eyeing and toeing the briefcase I brought in with me and set so discreetly under the table. You guessed it, I do happen to be carrying "work stuff" in there, among other things. Spot on, my dear—it would be foolish to leave anything important out in the car in this red-light district.

Well, I wouldn't say that this part of town is simply a *pit*. It is, of course, that. But your colloquialism doesn't begin to describe the various dimensions of decrepitude in the local geography. *Decrepitude*, Ro. It has your *pit* in it and a lot more besides. I speak from experience, more than you would believe. This whole city is most certainly a pitiful corpse,

while the neighborhood outside the walls of this bar has the distinction of being the withering heart of the deceased. And I am a devoted student of its anatomy—a pathologist, after a fashion, with an eye for necroses that others overlook.

For instance, have you ever been to that place called Speakeasy? Well, then you have some acquaintance with a bastardized nostalgia—the putrescence of things past. Yes, up a flight of stairs inside an old burlesque house is a high echoey hall with a leftover Deco interior of arching mirrors and chrome chandeliers. And there the giant painted silhouettes of bony flappers and gaunt Gatsbys sport about the curving ballroom walls, towering over the dance floor, their funereal elegance mocking the awkward gyrations of the living. An old dream with a new veneer. It's fascinating, you know, how an obsolete madness is sometimes adopted and stylized in an attempt to ghoulishly preserve it. These are the days of second-hand fantasies and out-of-date distractions.

But there are other sights in this city that I think are much more interesting. Not the least of which are those storefront temples of dubious denomination. There's one on Third and Dickerson called the Church of the True Dividing Light, not to be mistaken, I presume, with that false light which blinds so many searching eyes. Oddly enough, I've yet to see any light at all shining through the windows of this gray dwarfish building, and I always look for some sort of illumination as I ride by.

I tell you, no one worships this city as I do. Especially its witticisms of proximity, one strange thing next to another, which together add up to a greater strangeness. One of the more grotesque examples of this phenomenon occurs when

you observe that a little shop whose display window features a fabulous array of prosthetic devices is right next-door to Marv's Second Hand City. Then there are those places—you've noticed them, I'm sure—that are freakishly suggestive in a variety of ways. One of them is that pink and black checkerboard box on Bender Boulevard that calls itself Bill's Bender Lounge, where a garish marquee advertises Nightly Entertainment. And if you stare at that legend long enough, the word “nightly” will begin to connote more than the interval between dusk and dawn. Soon this simple term becomes truly evocative, as if it were code for the most exotic of nocturnal entertainments. And speaking of entertainment, I should cite that establishment whose owner, no doubt an epicure of musical comedy, gave it the title of Guys and Dolls, Inc. What a genius of vulgarity, considering that this business is devoted solely to the sale and repair of manikins. Or is it really a front for a bordello of dummies? No offense intended, Rosalie.

I could go on—I still haven't mentioned Miss Wanda's Wigs or that ancient and squalid hotel that boasts “A Bath in Every Room”—but maybe you're becoming a bit bored. Yes, I can understand what you mean when you say you don't notice that stuff after a while. The mind becomes dull and complacent, I know. Sometimes I get that way myself. But it seems that just when I'm comfortably mired in complacency, some good jolt comes along.

Maybe I'm sitting in my car, waiting for a red light to change. A derelict, drunk or brain-diseased, comes up to my defenseless vehicle and pounds on my windows—with both fists, like so—and demands a cigarette. He touches his ragged lips with scissored fingers to convey his meaning,

having left speech behind him long ago. A cigarette? I am a chemist, good sir, not a tobacconist. The traffic signal changes and I drive on, watching the bum's half-collapsed form shrinking in my rearview mirror. But somehow I've taken him on as a passenger, a ghostly shape sitting bleary-eyed beside me and raving about all kinds of senseless and fascinating things, the autobiography of confusion. And in a little while I'm back on the lookout once more.

Touching story, don't you—Yes, I suppose it is getting a bit late and we haven't made much progress. Your apartment? I think that would be fine. No, I had nothing else in mind as far as where we might do business. Your place is okay. Where is it, though? No kidding? That's the old Temple Towers with a new cognomen. Excellent, our ride will take us through the neighborhood in the shadow of the brewery. What floor of the building do you live on? Well, a veritable penthouse, an urban aerie. The loftier the better, I say.

Shall we go, then? My car is parked right out front.

I hope it hasn't decided to rain. Nope, it's a beautiful night. But look, that's my car where that cop is standing. Just stay calm. I certainly won't say anything if you don't. You're not, by chance, a vice officer in disguise, are you, Rosiecrantz? You wouldn't betray this unsuspecting Hamlet. A simple “no” would have been sufficient. If you use that kind of language again I'll turn you in to the authorities right now, and then we can see what sort of arrest record you've accumulated in your brilliant career. Silence, that's good. Just let me do the talking. Here goes.

Hi, officer. Yeah, that's my car. It's parked okay, isn't it? Geez, that's a relief. For a second I thought... my license and

registration? Sure thing. Here you go. Beg pardon? Yeah, I guess I am a little far from home. But I work close by. I'm a stockbroker, here's my card. You know, I've been in the business for some time now, and I can almost tell just by the look of a guy if he's got something invested in the market. I'd bet that you have. See there, I knew I was right. Doesn't matter if you're just small-time. Hey, have you been in touch with an investment counsellor lately? Well, you should. There's a lot going on. People talk about inflation, recession, depression. Forget it. If you know where to put your finances, I mean really know, it doesn't matter if it's Friday the 13th and the streets are bloody with corporate corpses.

Smart advice is what you need. It's all anyone needs. For example—and I tell you this just to make a point—there's an outfit in this city, not a half-mile from here in fact, by the name of Lochmyer Laboratories. They've been working on a new product and are just about ready to market it. ‘Course I don't understand the whole technical end of it, but I know for sure that it's going to revolutionize the field of—what d'you call it—psychopharmaceuticals. Revolutionize it the way antidepressants did. It'll be bigger than antidepressants. You know what I mean? That's the kind of thing you've got to know.

That's right, officer, Lochmyer Laboratories. Good company all around. I own stock in it myself. What tip, hell? Hey, you don't have to thank me. Beg pardon? A tip for me? Well, now that you mention it, there probably are better neighborhoods for a man such as myself to be frequenting. You've got my promise that you *won't* be seeing me around here anymore. I appreciate that, officer. I'll remember. And you remember Loch Lab. Right, then. ‘Night to you.

Wait for his car to turn the corner, Rosie, before getting in mine. We'll let the lawman maintain the illusion that his warning has set me straight with regard to the dangers of this seamy area and your seamy self. He looked at you like an old friend. Could have been trouble for both of us. You're a smart girl to have sat at my table tonight. I think my briefcase impressed him, don't you? Okay, we can get in the car now.

Yes, I did get us out of a touchy situation with that cop. But I hope when you just mentioned my *BS* apropos of that scene with the policeman, you had in mind the Bachelor of Science degree I received when I was twelve years old. This is your last warning about unclean idioms. Now roll down your window and let's air your words out of this car as we drive. And as far as my deceiving that fine officer goes—I actually didn't. No, I'm not really a stockbroker. I told you the truth about being in chemicals. And I told that mole-eyed patrolman the truth when I advised him to put his money in Lochmyer Lab, for we *are* about to market a new mind medicine that should make our investors as pleased as amphetamine addicts at an all-night coffee shop. How did I know he owned stock in the first place? That is strange, isn't it? I guess I was just lucky. This is just my lucky night—and yours too.

You don't much like the *policía*, do you, Rrrosa? Yes, of course I can blame you. Without them, where would all of us outlaws be? What would we have? Only a lawless paradise... and paradise is a bore. Violence without violation is only a noise heard by no one, the most horrendous sound in the universe. No, I realize you don't have anything to do with violence. I didn't mean to imply you did. Yes, I can drop you

off back at the bar when we've finished at your apartment. Of course.

Right now let's just enjoy the ride. What do you mean “so what's to enjoy”? Can't you see we're nearing the brewery? Look, there's its beer-golden sign, advertising the alchemical quest to transmute base ingredients into liquid gold. *Alchemical*, Rosetta. And I'm not referring to that cheapjack firm of Allied Chem. Just look around at these caved-in houses, these seedy stores, each one of them a sacred site of the city, a shrine, if you will. You won't? You've seen it all a million times? A slum is a slum is a slum, eh? Always the same. *Always*?

Never.

What about when it's raining and the brown bricks of these old places start to drip and darken? And the smoke-gray sky is the smoky mirror of your soul. You give a lightning blink at a row of condemned buildings, starkly outlining them. And do they blink back at you? Or does that happen only in another type of storm, when windows are slyly browed with city-soiled clumps of snow. Was it under such conditions that you first thought of all the cold and dark places in the universe, all the clammy basements and gloomy attics of creation? Bleak locales you'd rather not think about, but at the time couldn't keep from your mind. Another time you could have. No two times are the same. No two lives are alike. We're like aliens to one another. And when you're traveling through these streets with some stranger, you have to contend with how they see things, the way you now must deal with my 20-20 visions and I with your blasé near-sightedness. Are these the same gutted houses you saw last night, or even a second ago? Or are they

like the fluxing clouds that swirl above the chimneys and trees, and then pass on?

The alchemical transmutations are infinite and continuous, working all the time like slaves in the Great Laboratory. Tell me you can't perceive their work, especially in this part of the city. Especially where the glamour and sanity of former days wears a new mask of rats and rot, where an old style is transformed by time into a parody of itself which no man could foresee, where greater and greater schisms are forever developing between past shapes and future shapelessness, and finally where the evolution toward ultimate diversity can be glimpsed as if in a magic mirror.

This is, of course, the *real* alchemy, as you've probably gathered, and not that other kind which theorized that everything was struggling toward an auric perfection. Lead into gold, lower matter into higher spirit. No, it's not like that. Just the opposite, in point of fact. Please don't put that hunk of gum in your mouth. Throw it out the window, now!

As I was saying, everything is just variation without a theme. Oh, perhaps there is some unchanging ideal, some sturdy absolute. Scientifically, I suppose, we should allow for that improbability. But to reach that ideal would mean a hopeless stroll along the path to hypothetically higher worlds. And on the way our ideas become feverish and confused. What begins as a solitary truth soon proliferates like malignant cells in the body of a dream, a body whose true outline remains unknown. Perhaps, then, we should be grateful to the whims of chemistry, the caprices of circumstance, and the enigmas of personal taste for giving us such an array of strictly local realities and desires.

No, I didn't always think this freaky, as you put it. But I can tell you almost precisely when I began to see the truth of things. I was a callow freshman in college, even callower than most, given my precocious progress. One day something seemed to change in my chemistry, as I like to think of it. It was quite horrible for a while. Eventually, though, I realized that the alteration was from a false chemistry to a true one. Yes, that's when I decided to pursue the subject as my career, my calling. But that's a story in itself, and here we are now at your apartment tower.

Please don't slam the car door the way you were about to. No need to draw attention to our presence. You're right, there's really no one around to be attentive anyway. The local street vermin seem to have withdrawn into their burrows. Oops, almost forgot my briefcase. Wouldn't want to leave it unattended in this neighborhood, isn't that right? You're smiling about my briefcase, aren't you, Maryrose? You think you know something again. Well, go ahead and think that if you like. Everybody likes to think he has inside information. That policeman, for example. You could see how pleased he was to instantly become a man of knowledge, even if it's only by way of inside information about some stock on the market. Everybody wants to know what's what, *scientia arcana*, the real dope.

Maybe I do have some dope in my case. Then again, maybe it's just an empty prop, a leather vessel with a void inside. But you already know that I work for a dope company. You were thinking that, weren't you? Well, let's go up to your place and find out.

Cozy little lobby you have here. But I'm afraid the atmosphere is doing strange things to that pot of ferns over there.

Of course I know they're artificial. Which only means that Nature, one of the Great Chemists, made them at one remove, that's all. Here, this elevator seems to be working, though a little noisily. After you, Lady R. The twenty-second floor if I remember right, and I always do. Uh, I believe there's to be no smoking in this elevator, if you don't mind. Thank you. And here we are. I'll bet your place is down this way. See, I *am* always right. Isn't that funny? Yes, I'm coming, I'm coming.

Well, your apartment has a very nice door. No, you're wrong. There's no such thing as "just like all the others." Yours is quite different, can't you see that? And tonight your door is visibly different from any other time you've seen it. I'm not just being egoistical about my unique presence at your threshold this evening. Do you see what I mean? Well, I'm sorry if you feel I've been lecturing you all night. I was a pedagogue once, which I suppose is obvious. It's just that there are some important things I must impart to you, my little rosebud, before we're through. Okay? Now, let's go in and see what kind of view you have from up here.

Keep the ceiling light off please, so that I don't have to look at a double of this sleazy room reflected in your window. One of your dim lamps should give us all the light we need. There, that's fine. You do have a good view of the city from this height. I think it's perfect, not too far up. I live in a mere two-story house myself and being up here makes me dizzily realize what I'm missing. From this lofty keep I could nightly look out upon the city and its constant mutations. A different city every night. Yes, Rosie, I have to say you're right—sarcastic tone and all—the city is indeed also a vessel. And it's one that obediently takes the shape of very strange

contents. The Great Chemists are working out unfathomable formulae down there. Look at those lights outlining the different venues and avenues below. Look at their lines and interconnections. They're like a skeleton of something... the skeleton of a dream, the hidden framework ready at any moment to shift its structure to support a new shape. The Great Chemists are always dreaming new things and risking that they may wake up while doing so. Should that ever happen you can be assured there will be hell to pay.

My imagination? No, I don't think it's *vivid* at all. On the contrary, it's not nearly potent enough. My poor imaginative faculties have always needed... extensions. That's why I'm here with you. You're smiling again, or rather you're *smirking*. Funny word, smirk. Rather like an extraterrestrial surname. Simon Smirk. How do you think that sounds?

Yes, maybe we are wasting too much time. But of course we'll have to endure just one more delay while I rummage around in my briefcase and remove what you've been waiting for. So you hope it's good dope, eh? Well, you'll have a chance to find out, since you seem so anxious to become a vessel yourself for my chemicals. No, stay seated just where you are please. There's no reason for you to glimpse every elixir I've got in here. The only thing I have that might interest you is secured in one squat little container screwed tightly closed with a black cap... and here it is!

Yes, it does look like a bottle of powdered light. That's very observant. What is it? I thought you would know by now. Here, hold out your hand and you can have a closer look. Just a little mound sprinkled in the middle of your sweaty palm, about one brainful to be precise. Doesn't it look like pulverized diamonds? It glitters, yes it does. I don't

blame you for thinking it might be dangerous to snort, or whatever else you imagine you're supposed to do with it. But if you watch my magic dust very closely you'll see that you don't have to do anything at all.

See, it dissolved right into you. Disappeared completely, except for a few stray grains. But don't worry about them. Calm down, the burning will soon go away. There's no point in trying to rub the drug off your hand. It's in your system now. And it certainly won't help to get excited, nor are threats of any use to you. Please remain seated in that chair.

Can you feel any effects yet? I mean besides the fact that you're no longer able to move your arms or legs. That's just the beginning of this *nightly* entertainment. The opalescent substance you've just absorbed has now made possible a very interesting relationship between us, my red red rose. The drug has rendered you fantastically sensitive to the shaping influence of a certain form of energy, namely that which is being generated by me, or rather *through* me. To put it romantically, I'm now dreaming you. That's really the only way I can explain it that you might understand. Not dreaming *about* you, like some old love song. I'm *dreaming* you. Your arms and legs don't respond to your brain's commands because I'm dreaming of someone who is as still as a statue. I hope you can appreciate how remarkable this is.

Damn! I suppose that was your attempt to scream. You really are terrified, aren't you? Just to be safe, perhaps I'd better dream of someone who hasn't anything to scream with. There, that should do it. You do look strange, though, like that. But this is only just the beginning. These minor tricks are child's play and I'm sure don't impress you in any

way whatever. Soon I'll show you that I can really make an impression, once I put my mind to it.

Is there something in your eyes? Yes, I can see there is. A question. Right now you would like to ask, if only you still had the means to do so, what's to become of old Rosie? It's only fair that you should know.

We are presently coming into perfect tune with each other, my dreams and my dream girl. You are about to become the flesh and blood kaleidoscope of my imagination. In the latter stages of this procedure anything might happen. Your form will know no limits of diversity as the Great Chemists themselves take over. Soon I will put my dreaming in the hands of a prodigious insurrection of entity, and I'm sure there will be some surprises for both of us. That's one thing which never changes.

Nevertheless, there is still a problem with this process. It's not really perfect, certainly not marketable, as we say in the pill business. And wouldn't that be boring if it were perfect? What I mean to say is that under the stress of such diverse metamorphoses, the original structure of the object somehow breaks down. The consequence of this is simple—you can never be as you once were. I'm very sorry. You'll have to remain in whatever curious incarnation you take on at the dream's end. Which should rattle the wits of whoever is unfortunate enough to find you. But don't worry, you will not live long after I leave here. And by then you will have experienced god-like powers of proteation which I myself cannot hope to know, no matter how intimately I may try.

And now I think we can proceed with what has been your destiny all along. Are you ready? I am entirely ready and by degrees am giving myself over to those forces which go their

own way and take us with them. Can you feel us both being swept into a tempest of transfigurations? Can you feel the fevers of this chemist? The power of my dreaming, my dreaming, my dreaming, my…

Now Rose of madness—BLOOM!

The Chymist (1989 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

First published in *Nyctalops #16*, 1981

Hello, Miss. Why, yes, as a matter of fact I *am* looking for some company this evening. My name is Simon, and you are... Rosemary. Funny, I was just daydreaming in the key of Rosicrucianism. Never mind. Please sit, and watch out for splinters on your chair, so you don't catch your dress. It appears that everything around here has come to the point of frays and splinters. But what this old place lacks in freshness of decor it amply makes up in atmosphere, don't you think? Yes, as you say, I suppose it does serve its purpose. It's a little lax as far as table service, though. I'm afraid that in the way of drinks one must procure for one's self. Thank you, I'm glad you think I have a nice way of talkin'. Now, can I get you something from the bar? All right, a beer you shall have. And do me a favor please: before I come back, you will already have taken that wad of gum out of your mouth. Thank you, and I'll return shortly with our drinks.

Here you are, Rosie, one beer from the bar. Just don't belch and we'll get along fine. I'm pleased to see you've gotten rid of your gum, though I hope you didn't swallow it. The human stomach should probably remain ignorant of what it's like to accommodate beer and bubble gum in the same digestive episode. I know it's *your* stomach, but I'm

concerned about what gets mixed up inside any human vessel. No, I said *vessel*, not that anatomical cavity to which you smuttily refer: Man's hole is not his vessel. We're talking about things in which other things may be contained.

That's right, like that dirty little glass in your immaculate hand, now you're getting it. My glass? Yes, you do see a lot of red in there. I like red drinks. Created this one myself. A Red Rum Ginny, I call it. White rum, gin, pale ginger ale, and, ideally, cranberry juice, though the bartender here had to substitute some undistilled maraschino solution, which has neither the rich red color nor a fraction of the tartness of your smile. Would you like a sip? Go ahead, take a good belt. If you don't like it, say so. Yes, different is the word for it, the wellspring of its interest, as you've observed. I wonder, though, in whose mouth it tastes more different—mine or yours? We'll never know. Even adhering to the same mixological formula there's always some difference in taste, if only you have the *sensitivity* to notice it. In general, I think, there are always those varying factors that make every moment of our lives unique and strange to every other moment.

I have a high tolerance for *diversity* myself. You're smiling at my emphasis. You think you know something about me, and perhaps you do. Sharp girl! Of course, the imp of perversity in your thoughts is only one of the many offspring of the imp of the diverse. And diversity is the soul of life, or at least of life's amusement.

Pardon me? Yes, I have created other drinks. There's another red one I've pioneered that's actually just a variation on a standard number, but I like it. The Sweet and Sour Bloody Mary, made with high-test vodka, sugar, a lemon slice, and ketchup. It does sound like a meal in itself at that.

Very fortifying. No, sorry to spoil your joke, my fondness for red drinks does not extend to the vampire's neck-drawn nectar. Besides, I'm quite able to work during daylight hours.

Where? Well, I suppose I can tell you, *sub rosa*, that I'm employed by a pharmaceutical company not far from here, near that run-down warehouse district. I'm a chemist there. Yes, really. Well, it's nice the way you could see right off that I wasn't no average guy just comin' round after work lookin' for some fun. Perceptive girl! However, I did in fact come directly here after working a little overtime. I noticed while I was at the bar that you were eyeing and toeing the briefcase I brought in with me and set so discreetly under the table. Yes, there are papers in there relating to my work, among other things, never mind just now about that. But you're right that it would be foolish to leave anything important outside in one's car in this neighborhood.

Well, I wouldn't say that this part of town is simply a *pit*. It is, of course, that; but the word doesn't begin to describe the various dimensions of decrepitude in the local geography. *Decrepitude*, Ro. It has your *pit* in it and a lot more besides. I speak from experience, more than you would believe. This whole city is a pitiful corpse, and the neighborhood outside the walls of this bar has the distinction of being the withering heart of the deceased. Yes, I've gotten to know it over the years. I've gone out of my way to note its outlandish points of interest.

For instance, have you ever been to that place not far from here called Speakeasy? Well, then you have some acquaintance with the beautiful corruption of nostalgia, the putrescence of things past. Yes, up a flight of stairs from a crooked little street façade is a high echoey hall with a

leftover Deco decor of silvery mirrors and sequined globes. And there the giant painted silhouettes of bony flappers and gaunt Gatsbys sport about the curving ballroom walls, towering over the dance floor, their funereal elegance mocking the awkward gyrations of the living. An old dream with a shiny new veneer. It's fascinating, you know, how an obsolete madness is sometimes adopted and stylized in an attempt to ghoulishly preserve it. These are the days of second-hand fantasies and antiquated hysteria.

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I could go on—I still haven't mentioned Miss Wanda's Wigs or a certain hotel that boasts a “Bath in Every Room”—but maybe you're becoming a bit bored. Yes, I can understand what you mean when you say you don't notice that stuff after a while. The mind becomes dull and complacent. I know. Sometimes I get that way myself. But it seems that just when I'm comfortably mired in complacency, some good jolt comes along.

Maybe I'm sitting in my car, waiting for a red light to change. A derelict, drunk or brain-diseased or both, comes up to my defenseless vehicle and pounds on my windows—with both fists, like so—and demands a cigarette. He touches his ragged lips with scissored fingers to convey his meaning, having left speech behind him long ago. A cigarette? Indeed! The traffic signal changes and I drive on, watching the bum's half-collapsed form shrinking in my rearview mirror. But somehow I've taken him on as a passenger, a ghostly shape sitting cozily beside me and raving about all kinds of senseless and fascinating things, the autobiography of confusion. And in a little while I'm back on the lookout once more.

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Shall we go, then? My car is parked right out front.

I hope it hasn't decided to rain. Nope, it's a beautiful night. But look, that's my car where that cop is standing. Just stay calm. I certainly won't say anything if you don't. You're not, by chance, a vice officer in disguise, are you, Rosiecrantz? You wouldn't betray this unsuspecting Hamlet. A simple “no” would have been sufficient. If you use that kind of language again I'll turn you in to the cops right now, and then we can see what sort of arrest record you've accumulated in your brilliant career. Silence, that's good. Just let me do the talking. Here goes.

Hi, officer. Yeah, that's my car. It's parked okay, isn't it? Geez, that's a relief. For a second I thought—My driver's license? Sure thing. Here you go. Beg pardon? Yeah, I guess I am a little far from home. But I work real close to here. I'm a stockbroker, here's my card. You know, I've been in the business for some time now, and I can almost tell just by the look of a guy if he's got something invested in the market. I'd bet that you have. See there, I knew I was right. Doesn't matter if you're just small-time. Listen, have you been in touch with an investment counselor lately? Well, you should. There's a lot going on. People talk about inflation, recession, depression. Forget it. If you know where to put your finances, I

mean really know, it doesn't matter if it's Friday the thirteenth and the streets are bloody with corporate corpses.

Smart advice is what you need. It's all anyone needs. For example—and I tell you this just to make a point—there's an outfit right in this city, not a half-mile from here in fact, by the name of Lochmyer Laboratories. They've been working on a new product and are just about ready to market it. ‘Course I don't understand the whole technical end of it, but I know for sure that it's going to revolutionize the field of—what d'you call it—psychopharmaceutics. Revolutionize it the way tranquilizers did in the Fifties. It'll be bigger than tranquilizers. Bigger than LSD. You know what I mean? That's the kind of thing you got to know.

That's right, officer, Lochmyer Laboratories. And they're on the New York Exchange. Good outfit all around. I own stock in it myself. What tip, hell? Hey, you don't have to thank me. Beg pardon? A tip for me? Well, now that you mention it, probably there are better neighborhoods for a man like me to be frequenting. I guess you probably *won't* be seeing me around here anymore. I appreciate that, officer. I'll remember. And you remember Loch Lab. Right, then. ‘Night to you.

Wait for his car to turn the corner, Rosie, before getting in mine. We'll let the lawman maintain the illusion that his warning has set me straight with regard to the dangers of this seamy area and your seamy self. He looked at you like an old friend. Could have been trouble for both of us. You're a smart girl to have sat at my table tonight. I think my briefcase impressed him, don't you? Okay, we can get in the car now.

Yes, I did get us out of a touchy situation with that cop. But I hope when you just mentioned my B.S. apropos of that scene with the policeman, you were referring to the Bachelor of Science degree I received when I was sixteen years old. This is your last warning about unclean idioms. Now roll down your window and let's air your words out of this car as we drive. And as far as my deceiving that fine officer goes—I actually didn't. No, I'm not really a stockbroker. I told you the truth about being in chemicals. And I told that mole-eyed patrolman the truth when I advised him to put his money in Lochmyer Lab, for we *are* about to market a new mind medicine that should make our investors as pleased as amphetamine addicts at an all-night coffee shop. How did I know he owned stock in the first place? That is strange, isn't it? I guess I was just lucky. This is just my lucky night—and yours too.

You don't much like the *policía*, do you, Rrrosa? Yes, of course I can blame you. Without them, where would all of us outlaws be? What would we have? Only a lawless paradise... and paradise is a bore. Violence without violation is only a noise heard by no one, the most horrendous sound in the universe. No, I realize you don't have anything to do with violence. I didn't mean to imply you did. Yes, I can drop you off back at the bar when we've finished at your apartment. Of course.

Right now let's just enjoy the ride. What do you mean "so what's to enjoy"? Can't you see we're nearing the brewery? Look, there's its beer-golden sign, advertising the alchemical quest to transmute base ingredients into liquid gold. *Alchemical*, Rosetta. And I'm not referring to that shoddy firm of Allied Chem. Just look around at these hollowed-out houses,

these seedy stores, each one of them a sacred site of the city, a shrine, if you will. You won't? You've seen it all a million times? A slum is a slum is a slum, eh? Always the same. Al-*ways*?

Never.

What about when it's raining and the brown bricks of these old places start to drip and darken? And the smoke-gray sky is the smoky mirror of your soul. You give a lightning blink at a row of condemned buildings, starkly outlining them. And do they blink back at you? Or does that happen only in another type of storm, when windows are slyly browed with city-soiled clumps of snow. Was it under such conditions that you first thought of all the cold and dark places in the universe, all the clammy basements and gloomy attics of creation? Maybe you didn't want to think about those places, but you couldn't help yourself at the time. Another time you could have. No two times are the same. No two lives are alike: you have yours and others have theirs. And when you're traveling through these streets with some stranger, you have to contend with the way someone else sees things, the way you now must deal with my 20-20 visions and I with your blasé near-sightedness. Are these the same gutted houses you saw last night, or even a second ago? Or are they like the fluxing clouds that swirl above the chimneys and trees, and then pass on?

The alchemical transmutations are infinite and continuous, working all the time like slaves in the Great Laboratory. Tell me you can't perceive their work, especially in this part of the city. Especially where the glamor and sanity of former days wears a new mask of rats and rot, where an old style is transformed by time into a parody of itself which no man

could foresee, where greater and greater schisms are forever developing between past shapes and future shapelessness, and finally where the evolution toward ultimate diversity can be glimpsed as if in a magic mirror.

This is, of course, the *real* alchemy, as you've probably gathered, and not that other kind which theorized that everything was struggling toward an auric perfection. Lead into gold, lower matter into higher spirit. No, it's not like that. Just the opposite, in point of fact. Please don't put that hunk of gum in your mouth; throw it out the window, now! As I was saying, everything is just variation without a theme. Oh, perhaps there is some solid and unchanging ideal, shining very dimly and very far off. Scientifically, I suppose, we should allow for that improbability. But to reach that ideal would mean a hopeless stroll along the path to hypothetically higher worlds. And on the way our ideas become feverish and confused. What begins as a solitary truth soon proliferates like malignant cells in the body of a dream, a body whose true outline remains unknown. Perhaps, then, we should be grateful to the whims of chemistry, the caprices of circumstance, and the enigmas of personal taste for giving us such an array of strictly local realities and desires.

No, I didn't always think this freaky, as you put it. But I can tell you almost precisely when I began to see the truth of things. I was a callow freshman in college, even callower than most, given my precocious progress. One day something seemed to change in my chemistry, as I like to think of it. It was quite horrible for a while. Eventually, though, I realized that the alteration was from a false chemistry to a true one. Yes, that's when I decided to pursue the subject as

my career, my calling. But that's a story in itself, and here we are now at your apartment tower.

Please don't slam the car door the way you were about to. No need to draw attention to our presence. You're right, there's really no one around to be attentive anyway. The local street vermin seem to have withdrawn into their holes. Very good: "But their holes are not their vessels," indeed. Not the hole of man but the whole man is the true vessel, as some pompous sage might have said. And the *right* vessel is the whole point of the thing, for the best vessel will ultimately take the shape of its contents.

Never mind what I'm talking about. I just like to talk, as you may have noticed. Oops, almost forgot my briefcase. Wouldn't want to leave it unattended in this neighborhood, isn't that right? You're smiling about my briefcase, aren't you, Maryrose? You think you know something again. Well, go ahead and think that if you like. Everybody likes to think he has inside information. That policeman, for example. You could see how pleased he was to instantly become a man of knowledge, even if it's only by way of a knowledgeable tip on the stock market. Everybody wants to know the secret truth, *scientia arcana*, the real dope.

Maybe I do have some dope in my case. Then again, maybe it's just an empty prop, a leather vessel with a void inside. But you already know that I work for a dope company. You were thinking that, weren't you? Well, let's go up to your place and find out.

Cozy little lobby you have here; but I'm afraid the atmosphere is doing strange things to that pot of ferns over there. Of course I know they're artificial. Which only means that Nature, one of the Great Chemists, made them at one re-

move, that's all. Here, this elevator seems to be working, though a little noisily. After you, Lady R. The twenty-second floor if I remember right, and I always do. Uh, I believe there's to be no smoking in this elevator, if you don't mind. Thank you. And here we are. I'll bet your place is down this way. See, I am always right. Isn't that funny? Yes, I'm coming, I'm coming.

Well, your apartment has a very nice door. No, you're wrong. There's no such thing as "just like all the others." Yours is quite different, can't you see that? And tonight your door is visibly different from any other time you've ever seen it. I'm not just being egoistical about my unique presence at your threshold this evening. Do you see what I mean? Well, I'm sorry if you feel I've been lecturing you all night. I was a pedagogue once, which I suppose is obvious. It's just that there are some important things I must impart to you, my little rosebud, before we're through. Okay? Now, let's go in and see what kind of view you have from up here. Keep the ceiling light off please, so that I don't have to look at a double of this dour room reflected in your window. One of your dim lamps should give us all the light we need. There, that's fine. You do have a good view of the city from this height. I think it's perfect, not too far up. I live in a mere two-story house myself and being up here makes me dizzily realize what I'm missing. From this lofty keep I could nightly observe the city and its constant mutations. A different city every night. Yes, Rosie, I have to say you're right—sarcastic tone and all—the city is indeed also a vessel. And it's one that obediently takes the shape of very strange contents. The Great Chemists are working out unfathomable formulae down there. Look at those lights outlining the different venues and avenues be-

low, look at their lines and interconnections. They're like a skeleton of something... the skeleton of a dream, the hidden framework ready at any moment to shift its structure to support a new shape. The Great Chemists are always dreaming new things and risking that they may wake up while doing so. Should that ever happen you can be assured there will be hell to pay.

My imagination? No, I don't think it's vivid at all. On the contrary, it's not nearly potent enough. My poor imaginative faculties have always needed... extensions. That's why I'm here with you. You're smiling again, or rather you're smirking. Funny word, smirk. Rather like an extraterrestrial surname. Simon Smirk. How do you think that sounds? Yes, maybe we are wasting too much time. But of course we'll have to endure just one more delay while I rummage around in my briefcase and remove what you've been waiting for. So you hope it's good dope, eh? Well, you'll have a chance to find out, since you seem so anxious to become a vessel yourself for my chemicals. No, stay seated just where you are please. There's no reason for you to glimpse every little secret I've got in here. All you're interested in seeing is one squat little bottle screwed tightly closed with a black cap... and here it is!

Yes, it does look like a bottle of powdered light. That's very observant. What is it? I thought you would know by now. Here, hold out your hand and you can have a closer look. Just a little powdery mound in the middle of your sweaty palm, about one brainful to be precise. Doesn't it look like pulverized diamonds? It glitters, yes it does. I don't blame you for thinking it might be dangerous to snort, or whatever else you imagine you're supposed to do with it. But

by watching your hand very closely you'll see that you don't have to do anything at all.

See, it dissolved right into your palm. Disappeared completely, except for a few stray grains. But don't worry about them. Calm. down, the burning will soon go away. There's no point in trying to rub the drug off your hand. It's in your system now. And it certainly won't help to get excited, nor are threats of any use to you. Please remain seated in that chair.

Can you feel any effects yet? I mean besides the fact that you're no longer able to move your arms or legs. That's just the beginning of this nightly entertainment. You see, my glittering powder has now made possible a very interesting relationship between us. Between you and me, my red, red rose. The drug has rendered you fantastically sensitive to the shaping influence of a certain form of energy, namely that which is being generated by me, or rather through me. To put it romantically, I'm now dreaming you. That's really the only way I can explain it that you might understand. Not dreaming about you, like some old love song. I'm dreaming you. Your arms and legs don't respond to your brain's commands because I'm dreaming of someone who is as still as a statue. I hope you can appreciate how remarkable this is.

Damn! I suppose that was your attempt to scream. You really are terrified, aren't you? Just to be safe, perhaps I'd better dream of someone who hasn't anything to scream with. There, that should do it. You do look strange, though, like that. But we've only just begun. These minor tricks are child's play and I'm sure don't impress you in the least. Soon I'll show you that I can really make an impression, once I put my mind to it.

Is there something in your eyes? Yes, I can see there is. A question. Right now you would like to ask, if only you still had the means to do so, what's to become of old Rosie? It's only fair that you should know.

We are presently coming into perfect tune with each other, my dreams and my dream girl. You are about to become the flesh and blood kaleidoscope of my imagination. In the latter stages of this game anything might happen. Your form will know no limits of variety, for now the Great Chemists themselves are working through me. Soon I will put my dreaming in the hands of greater forces, and I'm sure there will be some surprises for both of us. That is one thing which never changes.

Nevertheless, there is still a problem with this process. It's not really perfect, certainly not marketable, as we say in the pill business. And wouldn't that be boring if it were perfect? What I mean to say is that under the stress of such diverse and alien metamorphoses, the original structure of the object somehow breaks down in a way even I don't understand. The consequence of the thing is simple: you can never be as you once were. I'm very sorry. You'll have to remain in whatever curious incarnation you take on at the dream's end. Which should rattle the wits of whoever is unfortunate enough to find you.

But don't worry, you will not live long after I leave here. And by then you will have experienced god-like powers of proteation which I myself cannot hope to know, no matter how intimately I may try.

And now I think we can proceed with what has been your destiny all along. Are you ready? I am entirely ready and by degrees am giving myself over to those forces which, with

any luck, I will never completely comprehend. Can you feel us both being caught up in the great web of delirium? Can you feel the fevers of this chemist? The power of my dreaming, my dreaming, my dreaming, my…

Now Rose of madness—Bloom!

Dream Of A Manikin (2010 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

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Once upon a Wednesday afternoon a girl stepped into my office for her first session. Her name was Amy Locher. (And didn't you once tell me that long ago you had a doll with this same given name?) Under the present circumstances I don't think it too gross a violation of professional ethics to use the subject's real name in describing her case to you. Certainly there's something more than simple ethics between us, *ma chère amie*. Besides, I understood from Miss Locher that you recommended me to her. This didn't seem necessarily ominous at first; perhaps, I speculated, your relationship with the girl was such that made it awkward for you to take her on as one of your own patients. Actually it's still not clear to me, my love, just how deeply you can be implicated in the overall experience I had with the petite Miss L. So you'll have to forgive any stupidities of mine which may crudely crop up in the body of this correspondence.

My first impression of Miss Locher, as she positioned herself almost sidesaddle in a leather chair before me, was that of a tense but basically self-possessed young woman. She was outfitted, I noticed, in much the classic style you normally favor. I won't go into our first-visit preliminaries here (though we can discuss these and other matters at dinner

this Saturday if only you are willing). After a brief chat we zeroed in on what Miss Locher called the “motivating factor” for consulting me. This involved, as you may or may not know, a recurring dream she had been having over the period of about a month. What will follow are the events of that dream as I have composed them from my tape of Miss Locher's September 10th session.

In the dream our subject has entered into a new life, at least to the extent that she holds down a different job from her waking one. Miss Locher had already informed me that for three years she has worked as a loan processor at a local financial firm. However, her working day in the dream finds her as a long-time employee of a fashionable clothing shop. Like those witnesses for the prosecution that the government wishes to protect with new identities, she has been outfitted by the dream with what seems to be a mostly tacit but somehow complete biography; a marvelous trick of the mind, this. It appears that one of the duties of her new job is to change the clothes of the manikins in the shop's display windows. She in fact feels as if her entire existence is slavishly given over to dressing and undressing these dummies. She is profoundly dissatisfied with her lot, and the manikins become the focal point of her animus.

Such is the general background presupposed by the dream, which now begins in proper. As our dummy dresser approaches her work, she is overwhelmed by an amorphous anxiety without a specific source. An awesome load of new clothes has arrived to adorn a display of manikins. Their unclothed bodies repel her touch because, as Miss Locher explained, they are neither warm nor cold, as only artificial bodies can be. (Note this rare awareness of temperature in a

dream, albeit neutral.) After bitterly surveying the ranks of these putty-faced creatures, she says: “Time to stop dancing and get dressed, sleeping beauties.” These words are spoken without spontaneity, as if ritually uttered to inaugurate each dressing session. But the dream changes before the dresser is able to put one stitch on the dummies, who stare at nothing with “anticipating” eyes.

The working day is now finished. She has returned to her small apartment, where she retires to bed… and has a dream. (This dream is that of the manikin dresser and not hers, she emphatically pointed out!)

The manikin dresser dreams she is in her bedroom. But what she now thinks of as her “bedroom” is to all appearances actually an archaically furnished hall with the dimensions of a small theater. The room is dimly lit by some jeweled lamps along the walls, the lights shining upon an intricately patterned carpet and various pieces of old furniture. She perceives the objects of the scene more as pure ideas than as material phenomena, for details are blurry and there are many shadows. There is something, however, which she visualizes quite clearly: one of the walls of this lofty room is missing, and beyond this great gap is a view of star-clustered blackness.

The dreamer is positioned on the other side of the room from the brink of the starry abyss. Sitting on the edge of a velvety divan, she stares and waits “without breath or heartbeat.” All is silent, another odd perception to have in a dream. This silence somehow “electrifies” the dream with strange currents of force betokening an unseen demonic presence.

Then a new feeling enters the dream, one slightly more tangible. There seems to be an iciness drifting in from that starscape across the room. (Temperature again; a rare dream indeed!) Once again our dreamer experiences a premonitory dread of something unknown. Without moving from her place on that uncomfortable couch, she visually searches the room for clues to the source of her terror. Many areas are inaccessible to her sight—like a picture that has been scribbled out in places—but she sees nothing particularly frightening and is relieved for a moment. Then her trepidation begins anew when she realizes for the first time that she hasn't looked behind her, and indeed she seems physically unable to do so.

Something is back there. She feels this to be a horrible truth. She *almost* knows what the thing is, but, afflicted with some kind of oneiric aphasia, she cannot find the word for what she fears. She can only wait, hoping that sudden shock will soon bring her out of the dream, for she is now aware that "she is dreaming," thinking of herself in the third person.

The words "she is dreaming" somehow form a ubiquitous motif for the present situation: as a legend written somewhere at the bottom of the dream, as echoing voices bouncing here and there around the room, as a motto printed upon fortune cookie-like strips of paper and hidden in bureau drawers, and as a broken record repeating itself on an ancient Victrola inside the dreamer's head. Then all the words of this monotonous slogan gather from their diverse places and like an alighting flock of birds settle in the area behind the dreamer's back. There they twitter for a moment, as upon the frozen shoulders of a statue in a park.

This is actually the way it seems to the dreamer, including the statue comparison. Something statuesque is approaching her. It radiates a field of dynamic tension that grows more intense the closer it comes, its shadow lengthening upon the floor. Still, she cannot turn around to see the horror behind her, for at this point she cannot move her body, which is stiff-jointed and rigid. Perhaps she can scream, she thinks, and makes an attempt to do so. But this fails, because by then there is already a firm and tepid hand that has covered her mouth from behind. The fingers on her lips feel like thick, naked crayons. Then she sees a long slim arm extending itself over her left shoulder, and a hand that is holding some filthy rags before her eyes and shaking them, "making them dance." And at that moment a dry sibilant voice whispers into her ear: "It's time to get dressed, little dolling."

She tries to look away, her eyes being the only things she can move. Now, for the first time, she notices that all around the room—in the shadowed places—are people dressed as dolls. Their forms are collapsed, their mouths opened wide. They do not look as if they are still alive. Some of them have actually become dolls, their flesh no longer supple and their eyes having lost the appearance of teary moistness. Others are at various intermediate stages between humanness and dollhood. With horror, the dreamer now becomes aware that her own mouth is opened wide and will not close.

But at last, shaking with tremors of the uncanny, she is able to turn around and face the menacing agent. The dream now reaches a shattering crescendo and she awakes. She does not, however, awake in the bed of the manikin dresser in her dream within a dream, but instead finds herself directly transported into the tangled, though real, bedcovers of

her loan processor self. Not exactly sure where or who she is for a moment, her first impulse on awaking is to complete the movement she began in the dream; that is, turning around to look behind her. (The hypnopompic hallucination that followed made her feel as if she had temporarily lost her mind.) What she saw, upon pivoting about, was more than just a blank wall. For projecting out of that moon-whitened surface was the face of a female manikin. And what particularly disturbed her about this illusion (and here we go deeper into already dubious realms) was that the face didn't melt away into the background of the wall the way post-dream projections usually do. It seems, rather, that this protruding visage, in one smooth movement, *withdrew* back into the wall. Her screams summoned more than a few concerned persons from neighboring apartments. End of dream and related experiences.

Now, my darling, you can probably imagine my reaction to the above psychic yarn. Every loose skein I followed led me back to you. The character of Miss Locher's dream is strongly reminiscent, in both mood and scenario, of matters you have been exploring for some years now. I'm referring, of course, to the all-around astral ambiance of Miss Locher's dream and how eerily it relates to certain notions (very well, *theories*) that in my opinion have become altogether too central to your *oeuvre* as well as to your *vie*. Above all, I refer to those “otherworlds” you say you've detected through a combination of occult studies and depth analysis. At this juncture, allow me to digress for a brief lecture apropos of the preceding.

It's not that I object to your delving into speculative models of reality, sweetheart, but why this particular one? Why

posit these “little zones,” as I've heard you call them, having such hideous attributes, or should I say anti-attributes (to keep up with your theoretical lingo)? To whimsically joke about such bizarrerie with phrases like “pockets of interference” and “cosmic static” belies your talents as a thoughtful member of our profession. And the rest of it: the hyper-uncanniness, the “ontological games,” the generally cosmic substance of these places, and all that other transcendent nonsense. I realize that psychology has charted some awfully weird areas in its maps of the mind, but you've gone so far into the ultra-mentational hinterlands of metaphysics that I fear you will not return (at least not with your reputation intact).

To speak of your ideas with regard to Miss Locher's dream, you can see the correlations, especially in the winding plot of her narrative. But I'll tell you when these links to your fanciful hypotheses really struck me with a hammer blow. It was just after she had related her dream to me. Now riding the saddle of her chair in the normal position, she made a few remarks obviously intended to convey the full extent of her disquiet. I'm sure she thought it *de rigueur* to tell me that after her dream episode she began entertaining doubts concerning what she really was. Loan processor? Manikin dresser? Other? Other other? Rationally, she knew her genuine, factual self. However, some “new sense of unreality” undermined her complete emotional assurance in this matter.

Surely you can see how the foregoing existential tricks fit in with those “harassments of the self,” as you style such phenomena. And just what are the boundaries of the self? Is there a secret communion of seemingly separate things?

How do animate and inanimate relate? Very boring, m'dear... zzzzz.

It all reminds me of that trite little fable of the Chinese philosopher (Chuang Tzu?) who dreamed he was a butterfly but upon waking affected not to know whether he was a man who'd dreamed he was a butterfly or a butterfly now dreaming... you get the idea. The question is: “Do things like butterflies dream?” Answer: an unequivocal “no,” as you may be aware from the research done in this field. The issue is ended right there. Accredited studies notwithstanding—as I'm sure you would contest—suppose the dreamer is not a man or butterfly, but both... or neither, something else altogether. Or suppose... really we could go on and on like this, and we have. Possibly the most repellent concept you've developed is that which you call “divine masochism,” or the doctrine of a Bigger Self terrorizing its little splinter selves, precisely that Something Else Altogether scarifying the man-butterfly with suspicions that there's a game going on over its head.

The trouble with all this, my beloved, is the way you're so adamant about its objective reality, and how you sometimes manage to infect others with your far-fetched convictions. Me, for instance. After hearing Miss Locher tell her dream story, I found myself unconsciously analyzing it much as you might have. Her multiplication of roles (including the role reversal with the manikin) really did put me in mind of some divine being that was splintering and scarring itself to relieve its cosmic ennui, as indeed a few of the well-reputed gods of world religion supposedly do. I also thought of your “divinity of the dream,” that thing which is all-powerful in its own sphere. Contemplating the realm of Miss Locher's

dream, I did experience a fleeting sense of that old vagary about a solipsistic dream deity commanding all it sees, all of which is only itself. And a corollary to solipsism even occurred to me: if, in any possible universe, one *always* has to allow that there are other universes that may be only dreams, then the problem becomes, as with our Chinese sleepyhead, knowing when one is actually dreaming and what form the waking self may have. And this is something one can *never* know. The fact that the overwhelming majority of thinkers reject any doctrine of solipsism more than suggests its unreality. And, after all, the feeling of dissociation from reality takes place only in a conscious state and not in dreams, wherein everything is absolutely real.

See what you've done to me! For reasons that you well know, my love, I try to give what serious consideration I can to your aberrant investigations. I can't help myself. But I don't think it right to be exerting your influence upon innocents like Miss Locher. I should tell you that I hypnotized the girl. And her unconscious testimony seems very much to incriminate you. She practically demanded the hypnosis, feeling this to be an easy way of unveiling the source of her problems. Because of her frantic insistence, I obliged her. A serendipitous discovery ensued.

She was a superior subject. In hypnosis we restricted ourselves to penetrating the mysteries of her dream. Her mesmerized rendition of it was amazingly consistent with her waking version, with the exception of one important item which I'll get to in a moment. I asked her to enlarge upon her feelings in the dream and any sense of meaning she experienced. Her responses to these questions were sometimes given in the incoherent language of the oneiric. She

said some quite awful things about life and lies and “this dream of flesh.” I don't think I need to go into the details of the chilling nonsense she uttered, for I've heard you say much the same in one of your “states.” (Really, it's appalling the way you dwell both on and in your zones of the metaphysically flayed self.)

That little thing which Miss Locher mentioned only under hypnosis, and which I have deferred referencing in its particulars, was a very telling piece of data. It told on you. For when my patient first described the scenes of her dream drama to me, she had forgotten—or just neglected to touch on—the presence of another character hidden in the background. This deep cover agent was the proprietor of the clothing store, a domineering boss who was played by a certain lady psychoanalyst. Not that you were ever on stage, even in a cameo appearance. But the hypnotized Miss Locher did remark in passing on the identity of this imperious figure in the dream of her working-girl self, this information being one of the many underlying suppositions of the dream. So you, my dear, were present in Miss Locher's hypnotic statement in more than just spirit.

I found this revelation immensely helpful in coordinating the separate items of evidence against you. The nature of the said evidence, however, was such that I could not rule out the possibility of a conspiracy between you and Miss Locher. So I refrained from asking my new patient anything about her relationship with you, and I didn't inform her of what she disclosed under hypnosis. My assumption was that she was guilty until proven otherwise.

Alternatives did occur to me, though, especially when I realized Miss Locher's extraordinary susceptibility to hyp-

nosis. Isn't it just possible, sweet love, that Miss Locher's incredible dream was brought on by one of those post-hypnotic suggestions at which you're so well practiced? I know that lab experiments in this area are sometimes eerily successful; and eeriness is, without argument, your specialty. Still another possibility involves the study of dream telepathy, in which you have no small interest. So what were you doing the night Miss Locher underwent her dream ordeal? (You weren't with me, I know that!) And how many of those eidola on my poor patient's mental screen were images projected from an outside source? These are just some of the peculiar questions which lately seem so necessary to ask.

But the answers to such questions would still only establish your means in this crime. What about your motive? On this point I need not exert my psychic resources. It seems there is nothing you won't do to impose your ideas upon common humanity—deplorably on your patients, obnoxiously on your colleagues, and affectionately (I hope) on me. I know it must be hard for a lonely visionary like yourself to remain mute and ignored, but you've chosen such an eccentric path to follow that I fear there are few spirits brave enough to accompany you into those zones of calculated deception, at least not voluntarily.

Which brings us back to Miss Locher. By the close of our first, and only, session I still wasn't sure whether she was a willing or unwilling emissary of yours. Hence, I kept mum about anything concerning your role in this mystery tale. Nor did she happen to speak of you in any significant way, except of course unconsciously in hypnosis. At any rate, as first sessions go, this one was more arduous and time-consuming than usual, which left my new patient no less tautly

wired than when we began. Not unreasonably, she asked me to prescribe for her. As Dr. Bovary tried to assuage the oppressive dreams of his wife with a prescription of valerian and camphor baths, I supplied Miss Locher with a program for serenity that included Valium and companionship (the latter of which I also recommend for us, dolling). Then we made a date for the following Wednesday at the same time. Miss Locher seemed most grateful, though not enough, according to my secretary, to pay up what she owed. And wait till you find out where she wanted us to send the bill.

The following week Miss Locher did not appear for her appointment. This did not really alarm me, for as you know many patients—armed with a script for tranquilizers and a single experience of therapy—decide they don't need any more help. But by then I had developed such a personal interest in Miss Locher's case that I was seriously disappointed at the prospect of not being able to pursue it further.

After fifteen patientless minutes had elapsed, I had my secretary call Miss Locher at the number she gave us. (With my former secretary—rest in peace—this would have been done automatically; so the new girl is not as good as you said she was, doctor. I shouldn't have let you insinuate her into my employ… but that's my fault, isn't it?) Maggie came into my office a few minutes later, presumably after she'd tried to reach Miss Locher. With rather cryptic impudence she suggested I dial the number myself, giving me the form containing all the information on our new patient. Then she left the room without saying another word. The nerve of that soon-to-be-unemployed girl.

I called the number, and it rang twice before someone answered. This someone was a young woman by the sound

of her voice, though not our Miss Locher. And the way she answered the phone told me I had a wrong number (the right wrong number). Nevertheless, I asked if an Amy Locher was associated in any way with the place I called. But the answering voice expressed total ignorance regarding the existence of any person by that name. I thanked her and hung up.

You will have to forgive me, my lovely, if by this time I began to feel like the victim of a hoax. “Maggie,” I intercommed, “how many more appointments for this afternoon?” “Just one,” she immediately answered, and then without being asked said: “But I can cancel it if you'd like.” I said I would like and that I intended to be out for the rest of the afternoon.

My intention was to call on Miss Locher at the, probably also phony, address on her new patient form. I had the suspicion that the address would lead to the same geographical spot as had the electronic nexus of the false phone number. Of course I could have easily verified this without leaving my office; but knowing you, sweet one, I thought that a personal visit was warranted. And I was right.

The address was a half-hour's drive away. It was in a high-class suburb on the other side of town from that high-class suburb in which I have my office. (And I wish you would move your own place of business from its present location, unless for some reason you need to be near a skid-row source that broadcasts on frequencies of chaos and squalor, which you'd probably claim.) I parked my big black car down the block from the street number I was seeking, which turned out to be located in the middle of the suburb's shopping district.

This was last Wednesday, which, if you'll recall, was a meteorologically abysmal day (an accomplishment I do *not* list among all your orchestrated connivances of my adventure). It was dim and moody most of the morning, and so prematurely dark by late afternoon that there were stars seemingly visible in the sky. A storm was imminent and the air was appropriately galvanized with a pre-deluge feeling of suspense. Display windows were softly glowing, and a jewelry store twinkled in the threatening gloom as I passed by. Of course, there's no further need to describe the atmosphere of that day, dear love. I just wanted to show how sensitive I was to a certain kind of portentous mood I know you adore, and how ripe I'd become for the staged antics to follow.

Distancewise, I only had to walk a few steps before arriving at the place purported to be the home of our Miss L. By then it was quite clear what I would find. There were no surprises so far. When I looked up at the neon-inscribed name of the shop, I heard a young woman's telephone voice whispering the words into my ear: Mademoiselle Fashions. And this is the store—n'est pas?—where it seems you acquire so many of your own lovely ensembles. But I'm jumping ahead with my expectations.

What I did not expect were the sheer *lengths* to which you would go in order to fire up my sense of strange revelation. Was this, I pray, done to bring us closer in the divine bonds of unreality? Anyway, I saw what you wanted me to see, or what I thought you wanted me to see, in the window of Mlle Fashions. The thing was even dressed in the same plaid-skirted outfit that I recall Miss Locher was wearing on her only visit to my office. And I have to admit that I was taken aback

when I focused on the frozen face of the manikin. Then again, perhaps I was subliminally looking for a resemblance between Miss Locher (your fellow conspirator, whether she knows it or not) and the figure in the window. You can probably guess what I noticed, or thought I noticed, about its eyes —what you would have me perceive as a watery gleam in their fixed gaze. Oh, woe is this Wednesday's child!

Unfortunately, I was unable to linger long enough to confirm positively the above perception, for a medium-intensity shower began to descend at that point. The rain sent me running to a nearby phone booth, where I had some business to conduct anyway. Retrieving the number of the clothing shop from my memory, I phoned them for the second time that afternoon. That was easy. What was not quite as easy was imitating your voice, my high-pitched love, and asking if the store's accounting department had mailed out a bill that month for my, I mean your, charge account. My impersonation of you must have been adequate, for the voice on the phone reminded me that I'd already taken care of all my recent expenditures. I, by whom I mean you, thanked the salesgirl for this information, apologizing for “our” forgetfulness, and then said good-bye. Perhaps I should have asked the girl if she was the one who helped rig up that manikin to look like Miss Locher, if indeed the situation was not the other way around, with Miss Locher following the fashion of display-window dummies. In any case, I did establish a definite link between you and the clothing shop. It seemed you might have accomplices anywhere, and to tell you the truth I was beginning to feel a bit paranoid standing in that little phone booth.

The rain was coming down even harder as I made a mad dash back to my black sedan. A bit soaked, I sat in the car for a few moments wiping off my rain-spotted glasses with a handkerchief. I said that I felt a slight case of paranoia coming on, and what follows proves it. While sitting there with my glasses off, I thought I saw something move in the rear-view mirror. My visual vulnerability, combined with the claustrophobic sensation of being in a car with rain-blinded windows, together added up to a momentary but very definite panic on my part. I quickly put on my glasses and found there was no one—and no t*hing*—whatever in the back seat. But the point is that I was forced to physically verify this fact in order to relieve my spasm of anxiety. You succeeded, my love, in getting me to experience a moment of self-terror. And in that moment I, too, became an accomplice in the mystical conspiracy of a treacherous universe. Brava!

You have indeed succeeded—assuming my inferences stand solid—in swaying me on a string you hold between your delicate fingers. Having confessed this much, I can now get to the *rea*l focus and "motivating factor" of my appeal to you. This has far less to do with A. Locher than it does with us, dearest. Please try to be sympathetic and, above all, patient.

I have not been well lately, and you know the reason why. This business with Miss Locher, far from bringing us to a more intimate understanding of each other, has only made the situation worse. Horrible nightmares now plague me on a nightly basis. Me, of all people! And they are directly due to the well-intentioned (I think) influence of you and Miss L. Let me describe one of these nightmares for you, and

thereby describe them all. This will be the last dream story, I promise.

In the dream I am in my bedroom, sitting upon my unmade bed and wearing my pajamas (Oh, will you never see them?).

The room is partially illuminated by beams from a streetlight shining through the window. And it also seems to me that a galaxy of constellations, though not witnessed firsthand, are contributing their light to the scene, a vaporous glowing which unnaturally blanches the entire upstairs of the house. I have to use the bathroom and walk sleepily out to the hallway… where I get the shock of my life.

In the whitened hallway—I cannot say *brightened*, because it is almost as if a fluorescent powder coats everything—there are things that look like people dressed as dolls, or else dolls made up to look like people. I remember being confused about which it was. And they are lying up and down the floor, at the top of the stairway, and even upon the stairs themselves as they disappear into the darker regions below. When I emerge from the bedroom, I see their eyes shining in the white darkness, and their heads are turned in all directions. Paralyzed—yes!—with terror, I merely return a fixed gaze, wondering if my eyes are shining the same as theirs. Then one of the doll people, slouching against the wall on my left, turns its head haltingly upon a stiff little neck and looks straight at me. Worse, it talks. And its voice is a horrible parody of human speech. Even more horrible are its words when it says: "Become as we are, sweetie. Die *into* us." Suddenly I begin to feel very weak, as if my life were being drained out of me. Summoning all my willpower, I manage to rush back to my bed, which ends the dream.

After I awake, screaming, my heart pounds like a mad prisoner inside me and doesn't let up until morning. This is very disturbing, for there's truth in those studies relating nightmares to cardiac arrest. For some poor souls, that imaginary incubus squatting upon their sleeping forms can do real medical harm. And I do not want to become one of these cases.

You can help me, my precious. I know you didn't intend things to turn out this way, but that bit of intrigue you perpetrated with the help of Miss Locher has really gotten to me. Consciously, of course, I still uphold the criticism I've already expressed about the basic absurdity of your work. Unconsciously, however, you seem to have awakened me to a stratum of abject terror. I will at least admit that your ideas form a powerful psychic metaphor, though no more than that. Which is quite enough, isn't it? It's certainly quite enough to inspire the writing of this letter, in which I plead for your attention, since I've failed to attract it in any other way. I can't go on like this! With your harrowing trickery you have possessed me down to my deepest self. Please release me from this spell, and let's begin a normal romance. However unknown may be their psychic mechanisms, it's only emotions that matter—not zones of the unreal, not a metaphysics stripped of all that is human.

In Miss Locher I believe you sent me an embodiment of your deepest convictions. But suppose I start admitting uncanny things about her? Suppose I grant that she was somehow just a dream. Suppose I allow that she was not a girl but actually a thing without a self, an unreality that, in accord with your vision of existence, dreamed it was a human being and not just a fabricated impersonation of our flesh? You

would have me entertain such thoughts. You would have me think there is some mysterious affinity among the things of this world, and of other worlds. So what if there is? I don't care anymore.

Forget other selves. Forget the third (fourth, nth) person view of life in which some god or demon has individuated itself into bits and pieces of all that is. Only first and second persons matter (I and thou). And by all means forget dreams. I, for one, know I'm not a dream. I am real, Dr.————. (There, how do you like being an anonymity without foundation in this or any other universe?) So please be so kind as to acknowledge the reality of my existence.

It is now after midnight, and I dread going to sleep and having another of those nightmares. You can save me from this fate, if only you can find it in your heart to do so. But you must hurry. Time is running out for us, just as these last few waking moments are now running out for me. Tell me it is still not too late for our love. Please don't destroy everything for us. You will only hurt yourself. And despite your high-flown theory of masochism, there is really nothing divine about it. So no more playing of the inhuman visionary. Be simple, be nice. Oh, I am so tired. I must say good night, then, but not goodbye, my foolish love. Hear me now. Sleep your singular sleep and dream of the many, all the other things that are you and that are me—and that are none of us. Wake up to the dolls of your dreams, which are their dreams, too. Die into them and leave me in peace. I will come for you later, and then you can always be with me in a special corner all your own, just as my little Amy once was. This is what you've wanted, and this you shall have. Die into

them, you simple soul, you silly dolling. Die with a nice bright gleam in your eyes.

Dream Of A Mannikin (1989 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

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Once upon a Wednesday afternoon, promptly at two o'clock, a girl stepped into my office. It was her first session, and she introduced herself as Amy Locher. (And didn't you once tell me that long ago you had a doll with this same first name?) Under the present circumstances I don't think it too gross a violation of professional ethics to use the subject's real name in describing her case to you. Certainly there's something more than simple ethics between us, ma chere amie. Besides, I understood from Miss Locher that you recommended me to her. This didn't seem necessarily ominous at first; perhaps, I speculated, your relationship with the girl was such that made it awkward for you to take her on as one of your own patients. Actually it's still not clear to me, my love, just how deeply you can be implicated in the overall experience I had with the petite Miss L. So you'll have to forgive any stupidities of mine, which may crudely crop up in the body of this correspondence.

My first impression of Miss Locher, as she positioned herself almost sidesaddle in a leather chair before me, was that of a tense and disturbed but basically efficient and self-seeking young woman. She was dressed and accessorized, I noticed, in much the classic style, which you normally favor. I

won't go into our first-visit preliminaries here (though we can discuss these and other matters at dinner this Saturday if only you are willing). After a brief while we zeroed in on the girl's immediate impetus for consulting me. This involved, as you may or may not know, a distressing dream she had recently suffered. What will follow, as I have composed them from my tape of the September 10th session, are the events of that dream.

In the dream our subject has entered into a new life, at least to the extent that she holds down a different job from her waking one. She had already informed me that for some five years she'd worked as a secretary for a tool and die firm. (And could this possibly be *your* delicate touch? Tooling into oblivion.) However, her working day in the dream finds her as a long-time employee of a fashionable clothes shop. Like those state witnesses the government wishes to hide with new identities, she has been outfitted by the dream with what seems to be a mostly tacit but somehow complete biography; a marvelous trick of the mind, this. It appears that the duties of her new job require her to change the clothes of the mannikins in the front window, this according to some mysterious and unfathomable schedule. She in fact feels as if her entire existence is slavishly given over to doing nothing but dressing and undressing these dummies. She is profoundly dissatisfied with her lot, and the mannikins become the focus of her animus.

Such is the general background presupposed by the dream, which now begins in proper. On a particularly gloomy day in her era of thralldom, our dummy dresser approaches her work. She is resentful and frightened, the latter emotion an irrational “given” at this point in the dream.

An awesome load of new clothes is waiting to attire a window full of naked mannikins. Their unwarm, uncold bodies repel her touch. (Note this rare awareness of temperature in a dream, albeit neutral.) She bitterly surveys the ranks of crayon-like faces and then says: “Time to stop dancing and get dressed, sleeping beauties.” These words are spoken without spontaneity, as if ritually used to inaugurate each dressing session. But the dream changes before the dresser is able to put one stitch on the dummies, who stare at nothing with “anticipating” eyes.

The working day is now finished. She has returned to her small apartment, where she retires to bed… and has a dream. (This dream is that of the mannikin dresser and not hers, she emphatically pointed out!)

The mannikin dresser dreams she is in her bedroom. But what she now thinks of as her “bedroom” is from all appearances actually an archaically furnished hall with the dimensions of a small theater. The room is dimly lit by some jeweled lamps along the walls, the lights shining “with a strange glaziness” upon an intricately patterned carpet and upon the massive pieces of antique and highly varnished furniture around the room. She perceives the objects of the scene more as pure ideas than physical things, for details are blurry and there are many shadows. One thing, though, she visualizes quite clearly as the dominant feature of the room: there is a wall that from the floor to the lofty ceiling is completely missing. In place of the absent wall is a view of star-clustered blackness, which she sees either through a great window or irrationally in the depths of an equally great mirror. In any case, this maze of stars and blackness appears as an enormous mural and suggests an uncertain location for a

room formerly thought to be nestled at the cozy crossroads of well-known coordinates. Now it is truly just a lost point within an unknown universe of sleep.

The dreamer is positioned almost on the opposite side of the room from the brink of the starry abyss. Sitting on the edge of an armless, backless couch of complex brocade, she stares and waits "without breath or heartbeat," these functions being quite unnecessary to her dream self. Everything is in silence. This silence, however, is somehow charged with strange currents of force, which she can't really explain, an insane physics electrifying the atmosphere with demonic powers lurking just beyond the threshold of sensory perception. All is perceived with, elusive dream senses.

Then a new feeling enters the dream, one slightly more tangible. There seems to be an iciness drifting in from the area of the great mirror or window, perhaps now merely a windowless aperture looking out on the chilly void. Suddenly our dreamer experiences a cumulative terror of everything that has happened, is happening, or will happen to her. Without moving from her place on that uncomfortable couch, she visually searches the room for clues to the source of her terror. Many areas are inaccessible to her sight —like a picture that has been scribbled out in places—but she sees nothing specifically frightening and is relieved for a moment. Then her horror begins anew when she realizes for the first time that she hasn't looked behind her, and indeed she seems physically unable to do so now.

Something is back there. She feels this to be a horrible truth. She *almost* knows what the thing is, but afflicted with some kind of oneiric aphasia she cannot articulate any words or clear ideas to herself. She can only wait, hoping that sud-

den shock will soon bring her out of the dream, for she is now aware that “she is dreaming,” for some reason thinking of herself in the third person.

The words “she is dreaming” somehow form a ubiquitous motif for the present situation: as a legend written somewhere at the bottom of the dream, as echoing voices bouncing here and there around the room, as a motto printed upon fortune cookie-like strips of paper and hidden in bureau drawers, and as a broken record repeating itself on an ancient Victrola inside the dreamer's head. Then all the words of this monotonous slogan gather from their diverse places and like an alighting flock of birds settle in the area behind the dreamer's back. There they twitter for a moment, as upon the frozen shoulders of a statue in a park. This is actually the way it seems to the dreamer, including the statue comparison. Something of a statuesque nature is back there, approaching her. Something that is radiating a searing field of tension, coming closer, its great shadow falling across and enlarging her own there upon the floor. Still she cannot turn around, cannot move her body, which is stiff-jointed and rigid. Perhaps she can scream, she thinks, and makes an attempt to do so. But this fails, because by then there is already a firm and tepid hand that has covered her mouth from behind. The fingers on her lips feel like thick, naked crayons. Then she sees a long slim arm extending itself out over her left shoulder, and a hand that is holding some filthy rags before her eyes and shaking them, “making them dance.” And at that moment a dry sibilant voice whispers into her ear: “It's time to get dressed, little dolling.”

She tries to look away, her eyes being the only things she can still move. Now, for the first time, she notices that all around me room—in the shadowed places—are people dressed as dolls. Their forms are collapsed, their mouths opened wide. They do not look as if they are still alive. Some of them have actually become dolls, their flesh no longer supple and their eyes having lost the appearance of moistness. Others are at various intermediate stages between humanness and dollhood. With horror, the dreamer now becomes aware that her own mouth is opened wide and will not close.

But at last, through the power of her fear, she is able to turn around and face the menacing agent. The dream now reaches a crescendo and she awakes. She does not, however, awake in the bed of the mannikin dresser in her dream within a dream, but instead finds herself directly transported into the tangled, though real, bedcovers of her secretary self. Not exactly sure where or who she is for a moment, her first impulse on awaking is to complete the movement she began in the dream; that is, turning around to look behind her. (The hypnopompic hallucination that followed served as a "strong motivating factor" in her seeking the powers of a psychiatrist.) What she saw, upon pivoting around, was more than just a simple headboard with a blank wall above. For projecting out of that moon-whitened wall was the face of a female mannikin. And what particularly disturbed her about this illusion (and here we go deeper into already dubious realms) was that the face didn't melt away into the background of the wall the way post-dream projections usually do. It seems, rather, that this protruding visage, in one smooth movement, *withdrew* back into the wall. Her screams

summoned more than a few concerned persons from neighboring apartments.

End of dream and related experiences.

*

Now, my darling, you can probably imagine my reaction to the above psychic yarn. Every loose skein I followed led me back to you. The character of Miss Locher's dream is strongly reminiscent, in both mood and scenario, of matters you have been exploring for some years now. I'm referring, of course, to the all-around astral ambiance of Miss Locher's dream and how eerily it relates to certain notions (very well, *theories*) that in my opinion have become altogether too central to your *oeuvre* as well as to your *vie*. Specifically I mean those "otherworlds" you say you've detected through a combination of occult studies and depth analysis.

Let me digress for a brief lecture apropos of the preceding.

It's not that I object to your delving into speculative models of reality, sweetheart, but why this particular one? Why posit these "little zones," as I've heard you call them, having such hideous attributes, or should I say *anti*-attributes (to keep up with your lingo)? To whimsically joke about such bizarrerie with phrases like "pockets of interference" and "cosmic static," belies your talents as a thoughtful member of our profession. And the rest of it: the hyper-uncanniness, the warped relationships that are supposed to obtain in these places, the "games with reality," and all the other transcendent nonsense. I realize that psychology has charted some awfully weird areas in its maps of the mind, but you've

gone so far into the ultra-mental hinterlands of metaphysics that I fear you will not return (at least not with your reputation intact).

To speak of your ideas with regard to Miss Locher's dream, you can see the connections, especially in the tortuous plot of her narrative. But I'll tell you when these connections really struck me with a hammer blow. It was just after she had related her dream to me. She was now riding the saddle of her chair in the normal position, and she made a few remarks obviously intended to convey the full extent of her distress. I'm sure she thought it de rigueur to tell me that after her dream episode she began entertaining doubts concerning who she really was. Secretary? Attirer of mannikins? Other? Other other? She knew, of course, the identity of her genuine, factual self; it was just some "new sense of unreality" that undermined complete assurance in this matter.

Surely you can see how the above identity tricks fit in with those "harassments of the self" that you say are one of the characteristic happenings in these zones of yours. And just what are the boundaries of self? Is there a communion of seemingly separate things? How do animate and inanimate relate? Very boring, m'dear... zzzzz.

It all reminds me of that trite little fable of the Chinese (Chuang Tzu?) who dreamed he was a butterfly but upon waking affected not to know whether he was a man who'd dreamed he was a butterfly or a butterly now dreaming, etc. The question is, "Do things like butterflies dream?" (Ans.: no. Recall the lab studies on the subject, if you will for once.) The issue is ended right there. However—I'm sure you would contest—suppose the dreamer is not a man or butterfly, but

both… or neither, something else altogether. Or suppose… really we could go on and on like this, and we have. Possibly the most repellent concept you've developed on this subject is that which you call “divine masochism,” or the doctrine of a Bigger Self terrorizing its little splinter selves, precisely that Something Else Altogether scarifying the man-butterfly with uncanny suspicions that there's a game going on over its collective head.

The trouble with all this, my beloved, is the way you're so adamant of its objective reality, and how you sometimes manage to infect others with your peculiar convictions. Me, for instance. After hearing Miss Locher tell her dream story, I found myself unconsciously analyzing it much as you might have. Her multiplication of roles (including the role reversal with the mannikin) really put me in mind of some divine being that was splintering and scaring itself to relieve its cosmic ennui, as indeed a few of the well-reputed gods of world religion supposedly do. I also thought of your “divinity of the dream,” that thing which is all-powerful in its own realm. Contemplating the realm of Miss Locher's dream, I came to deeply feel that old truism of a solipsistic dream deity commanding all it sees, all of which is only itself. And a corollary to solipsism even occurred to me: if in any dream of a universe one has to *always* allow that there is another, waking universe, and then the problem becomes, as with our Chinese sleepyhead, knowing when one is actually dreaming and what form the waking self may have; and this one can *never* know. The fact that the overwhelming majority of thinkers reject any doctrine of solipsism suggests the basic horror and disgusting unreality of its implications. And after all, the horrific feeling of unreality is much more

prevalent (to certain people) in what we call human “reality” than in human dreams, where everything is absolutely real.

See what you've done to me! For reasons that you well know, I always try to argue your case, my love. I can't help myself. But I don't think it's right to be exerting your influence upon innocents like Miss Locher. I should tell you that I hypnotized the girl. Her unconscious testimony seems very much to incriminate you. She almost demanded the hypnosis, feeling this to be an easy way of unveiling the source of her problems. And because of her frantic demands, I obliged her. A serendipitous discovery ensued.

She was an excellent subject. In hypnosis we restricted ourselves to penetrating the mysteries of her dream. I had her recount the events of the dream with the more accurate memory of her hypnotized state. Her earlier version was amazingly factual, with the exception of an important datum which I'll get to in a moment. I asked her to elaborate on her feelings in the dream and any sense of meaning she experienced. Her responses to these questions were sometimes given in the incoherent language of delirium and dream. She said some quite horrible things about life and lies and “this dream of flesh.” I don't think I need expand on the chilling nonsense she uttered, for I've heard you say much the same in one of your “states.” (Really, it's appalling the way you dwell on and in your zones of the metaphysically flayed self.)

That little thing Miss Locher mentioned only under hypnosis, and which I temporarily omitted above, was a very telling piece of info. It told on you. For when my patient first described the scenes of her dream drama to me, she had forgotten—or just neglected to mention—the presence of an-

other character hidden in the background. This character was the proprietor of the nameless clothing store, a domineering boss who was played by a certain lady psychoanalyst. Not that you were ever on stage, even in a cameo appearance. But the hypnotized Miss Locher did remark in passing on the identity of the employer of her oneiric self, this being one of the many underlying suppositions of the dream. So you, my dear, were present in Miss Locher's hypnotic statement in more than just spirit.

I found this revelation immensely helpful in coordinating the separate items of evidence against you. The nature of the evidence, however, was such that I could not rule out the possibility of a conspiracy between you and Miss Locher. So I refrained from asking my new patient anything about her relationship with you, and I didn't inform her of what she disclosed under hypnosis. My assumption was that she was guilty until proven otherwise.

Alternatives did occur to me, though, especially when I realized Miss Locher's extraordinary susceptibility to hypnosis. Isn't it just possible, sweet love, that Miss Locher's incredible dream was induced by one of those post-hypnotic suggestions at which you're so well practised? I know that lab experiments in this area are sometimes eerily successful, and the eerie is, without argument, your specialty. Still another possibility involves the study of dream telepathy, in which you have no small interest. So what were you doing the night Miss Locher underwent her dream ordeal? (You weren't with me, I know that!) And how many of those eidola on my poor patient's mental screen were images projected from an outside source? These are just some of the bizarre questions which lately seem so necessary to ask.

But the answers to such questions would still only establish your means in this crime. What about your motive? On this point I need not exert my psychic resources. It seems there is nothing you won't do to impose your ideas upon common humanity—deplorably on your patients, obnoxiously on your colleagues, and affectionately (I hope) on me. I know it must be hard for a lonely visionary like yourself to remain mute and ignored, but you've chosen such an eccentric path to follow that I fear there are few spirits brave enough to accompany you into those zones of deception and pain, at least not voluntarily.

Which brings us back to Miss Locher. By the end of our first, and only, session I still wasn't sure whether she was a willing or unwilling agent of yours; hence, I kept mum, very mum, about anything concerning you. Neither did she mention you in any significant way, except of course unconsciously in hypnosis. At any rate, she certainly appeared to be a genuinely disturbed young lady, and she asked me to prescribe for her. As Dr. Bovary tried to assuage the oppressive dreams of his wife with a prescription of valerian and camphor baths, I supplied Miss Locher with a program for serenity that included Valium and companionship (the latter of which I also recommend for us, dolling). Then we made a date for the following Wednesday at the same time. Miss Locher seemed most grateful, though not enough, according to my secretary, to pay up what she owed. And wait till you find out where she wanted us to send the bill.

The following week Miss Locher did not appear for her appointment. This did not really alarm me, for, as you know many patients—armed with a script for tranquilizers and a single experience of therapy—decide they don't need any

more help. But by then I had developed such a personal interest in Miss Locher's case that I was seriously disappointed at the prospect of not being able to pursue it further.

After fifteen patientless minutes had elapsed, I had my secretary call Miss Locher at the number she gave us. (With my former secretary—poor thing!—this would have been done automatically; so the new girl is not as good as you said she was, doctor. I shouldn't have let you insinuate her into my employ… but that's my fault, isn't it?) Maggie came into my office a few minutes later, presumably after she'd tried to reach Miss Locher. With rather cryptic impudence she suggested I dial the number myself, giving me the form containing all the information on our new patient. Then she left the room without saying another word. The nerve of that soon-to-be-unemployed girl.

I called the number—which incidentally plays the song about Mary's lamb on the push button phone in my office—and it rang twice before someone answered. This someone had the voice of a young woman but was not our Miss Locher. In any case, the way this woman answered the phone told me I had a wrong number (the right wrong number). Nevertheless, I asked if a Miss Locher could be reached at that number or any of its possible extensions, but the answering female's voice expressed total ignorance regarding the existence of any person by that name. I thanked her and hung up.

You will have to forgive me, my lovely, if at this point I had begun to feel like the victim of a hoax, your hoax to be exact. “Maggie,” I intercommed, “how many more appointments for this afternoon?” “Just one,” she immediately answered, and then without being asked to, said: “But I can

cancel it if you'd like." I said I would like, that I would be gone for the rest of the afternoon.

My intention was to pay a visit on Miss Locher at the, probably also phony, address on her new patient form. I had the suspicion that the address would lead to the same geographical spot as had the electronic nexus of the false phone number. Of course I could have easily verified this without leaving my office, but knowing you, sweet one, I thought that a personal visit was warranted. And I was right.

The address was an hour's drive away. It was in a fashionable suburb on the other side of town from that fashionable suburb in which I have my office. (And I wish you would remove your own place of business from its present location, unless for some reason you need to be near a skid-row source that broadcasts on frequencies of chaos and squalor, which you'd probably claim.) I parked my big black car on the street I was looking for, which also turned out to be the main street of the suburb's shopping district.

This was last Wednesday, and if you'll recall it was quite an unusual day (an accomplishment I do *n*ot list among all your orchestrated connivings of my adventure). It was dim and moody most of the morning, and so prematurely dark by late afternoon that there were stars seemingly visible in the sky. A storm was imminent and the air was appropriately galvanized with a pre-deluge feeling of suspense. Display windows were softly glowing, and one jewelry store I passed twinkled with electric glory in the corner of my eye. In the stillness I strolled beside a row of trees, each of their slender trunks planted in a complex mosaic along the sidewalk, all of their tiny leaves fluttering.

Of course, there's no farmer need to describe the atmosphere of a place you've visited many times, dear love. But I just wanted to show how sensitive I was to a certain kind of portentous mood, and how ripe I'd become for the staged antics to follow. Very good, doctor!

Distance-wise, I only had to walk a few gloomy blocks before arriving at the place purported to be the home of our Miss L. By then it was pretty clear what I would find. There were no surprises so far. When I looked up at the neon-inscribed name of the shop, I heard a young woman's telephone voice whispering the words into my ear: Mademoiselle Fashions. A fake French accent here, S.V.P. And this is the store—no?—where it seems you acquire so many of your own lovely ensembles. But I'm jumping ahead with my expectations.

What I did not expect were the sheer *lengths* to which you would go in order to arouse my sense of strange revelation. Was this, I pray, done to bring us closer in the divine bonds of unreality? Anyway, I saw what you wanted me to see, or what I thought you wanted me to see, in the window of Mile. Fashions. The thing was even dressed in the same plaid-skirted outfit that I recall Miss Locher was wearing on her only visit to my office. And I have to admit that I was a bit shocked—perhaps attributable in part to the strange climatic conditions of the day—when I focused on the frozen face of the mannikin. Then again, perhaps I was subliminally looking for a resemblance between Miss Locher (your fellow conspirator, whether she knows it or not) and the figure in the window. You can probably guess what I noticed, or thought I noticed, about its eyes—what you would have me perceive as

a certain *moistness* in their fixed gaze. Oh, woe is this Wednesday's child!

Unfortunately, I was unable to linger long enough to positively confirm the above perception, for a medium-intensity shower began to descend at that point. The rain sent me running to a nearby phone booth, where I had some business to conduct anyway. Retrieving the number of the clothes store from my memory, I phoned them for the second time that afternoon. That was easy. What was not quite as easy was imitating your voice, my high-pitched love, and asking if the store's accounting department had mailed out a bill that month for my, I mean your, charge account. My impersonation of you must have been very good, for the voice on the phone reminded me that I'd already taken care of all my recent expenditures. You thanked the salesgirl for this information, apologizing for your forgetfulness, and then said good-bye. Perhaps I should have asked the girl if she was the one who helped rig up that mannikin in the window to look like Miss Locher, if indeed the situation was not the other way around, with Miss Locher following the fashion of display-window dummies. In any case, I did establish a definite link between you and the clothes store. It seemed you might have accomplices anywhere, and to tell you the truth I was beginning to feel a bit paranoid standing in that little phone booth.

The rain was coming down even harder as I made a mad dash back to my black sedan. A bit soaked, I sat in the car for a few moments wiping off my rain-spotted glasses with a handkerchief. I said I was becoming a bit paranoid and what follows proves it. While sitting there without my glasses on, I thought I saw something move in the rearview mirror. My

visual vulnerability, combined with the claustrophobic feeling of being in a car with rain-blinded windows, together added up to a momentary but very definite panic on my part. Of course I quickly put my glasses on and found there was nothing whatever in the backseat. But the point is that I had to check in order to relieve my spasm of anxiety. You had succeeded, my love, in getting me to experience a moment of self-terror, and in that moment I, too, became your accomplice against myself. Bravo!

You have indeed succeeded—assuming all my inferences thus far are for the most part true—perhaps more than you know or ever intended. Having confessed all this, possibly now I can get to the *real* focus and "motivating factor" of my appeal to you. This has much less to do with A. Locher than it does with us, dearest. Please try to be sympathetic and, above all, patient.

I have not been well lately, and you well know the reason why. This business with Miss Locher, far from bringing us to a more intimate understanding of each other, has only made the situation worse. Horrible nightmares have been plaguing me every night. Me, of all people! And they are directly due to the well-intentioned (I think) influence of you and Miss L. I'll describe one of these nightmares for you, and therefore describe them all. This will be the last dream story, I promise.

In the dream I am in my bedroom, sitting upon my unmade bed and wearing my pajamas (Oh, will you never see them?) The room is partially illuminated by beams from a streetlight shining through the window. And it also seems to me that a whole galaxy of constellations, although not actually witnessed firsthand, are contributing their light to the

scene, a ghastly glowing which unnaturally blanches the entire upstairs of the house. I have to use the bathroom and walk sleepily out to the hallway… where I get the shock of my life.

In the whitened hallway—I cannot say *brightened*, because it is almost as if a very fine and luminous powder coats everything—are these things lying up and down the floor, on the upper landing of the stairway, and even upon the stairs themselves as they disappear into the darker regions below. These things are people dressed as dolls, or else dolls made up to look like people dressed as dolls. I remember being confused about which it was.

But people or dolls, their heads are all turned in my direction as I emerge from the bedroom, and their eyes shine in the white darkness. Paralyzed—yes!—with terror, I merely return a fixed gaze, wondering if my eyes are shining the same as theirs. Then one of the doll people, slouching against the wall on my near left, turns its head haltingly upon a stiff little neck and looks into my eyes. Worse, it talks. And its voice is an horrific cackling parody of speech. Even more horrible are its words, as it says: "Become as we are, sweetie. Die *into* us." Suddenly I begin to feel weak, as if my life were being drained out of me. Summoning all my powers of movement, I manage to rush back to my bed to end the dream.

After I awake, screaming, my heart pounds like a mad prisoner inside me and it doesn't let up until morning. This is very disturbing for me, for there's truth in those studies relating nightmares and cardiac arrest. For some poor souls, that imaginary incubus sitting upon their chest can do real

medical harm. And I do not want to become one of these cases.

You can help me, sweetheart. I know you didn't intend things to turn out this way, but that elaborate joke you perpetrated with the help of Miss Locher has really gotten to me. Consciously, of course, I still uphold the criticism I've already expressed about the basic absurdity of your work. Unconsciously, however, you seem to have awakened me to a stratum (*zone*, I know you would say) of uncanny terror in my mind-soul. I will at least admit that your ideas form a powerful psychic metaphor, though no more than that. Which is quite enough, isn't it? It's certainly quite enough to inspire the writing of this letter, in which I plead for your attention, since I've failed to attract it in any other way. I can't go on like this! You have strange powers over me, as if you didn't already know it. Please release me from your spell, and let's begin a normal romance. Who really gives a damn about the metaphysics of invisible realms anyway? It's only emotions, not abstractions, that count. Love and terror are the true realities, whatever the unknowable mechanics are that turns their wheels, and our own.

In Miss Locher I believe you sent me the embodiment of your deepest convictions, a love note if you will. But suppose I start admitting weird things about Miss L? Suppose I admit that she was somehow just a dream. (Then she must have been my secretary's dream too, for she saw her.) Suppose I even admit that Miss Locher was not a girl but actually a multi-selved *thing*—part Man, part mannikin—and with your assistance dreamed itself for a time into existence, reproduced itself in human form just as we reproduce ourselves with an infinite variety of images and shapes, all

those impersonations of your flesh? You would like to have me think of things like this. You would like to have me think of all the mysterious connections among the things of this world, and of other worlds. So what if there are? I don't care anymore.

Forget other selves. Forget the third (fourth, nth) person view of life; only first and second persons are important (I and thou). And by all means forget dreams. I, for one, know I'm not a dream. I am real, Dr. —— (There, how do you like being anonymized?) So please be so kind as to acknowledge my existence.

It is now after midnight, and I dread going to sleep and having another of those nightmares. You can save me from this fate, if only you can find it in your heart to do so. But you must hurry. Time is running out for us, my love, just as these last few waking moments are now running out for me. Tell me it is still not too late for our love. Please don't destroy everything for us. You will only hurt yourself. And despite your high-flown theory of masochism, there is really nothing divine about it. So no more of your strange psychic deceptions. Be simple, be nice. Oh, I am so tired. I must say good night, then, but not good

Bye, my foolish love. Hear me now. Sleep your singular sleep and dream of the many, the others. They are also part of you, part of us. Die into them and leave me in peace. I will come for you later, and then you can always be with me in a special corner all your own, just as my little Amy once was. This is what you've wanted, and this you shall have. Die into them. Yes, die into them, you simple soul, you fool, you lover, you silly dolling. Die with a nice bright gleam in your eyes.

Dream Of A Mannikin (1982 Eldritch Tales Version)

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The girl who came into my office Wednesday for a session at two o'clock said her name was Amy Locher. (And didn't you once tell me that long ago you had a doll with this same first name?) Under the present circumstances I don't think it too gross a violation of professional ethics to use the subject's real name in describing her case to you. Certainly there's something more than simple ethics between us, ma chere amie. Besides, I understood from Miss Locher that you recommended me to her. This didn't seem necessarily ominous at first; perhaps, I speculated, your relationship with the girl was such that made it awkward for you to take her on as one of your own patients. Actually it's still not clear to me, my love, just how deeply you can be implicated in the overall experience I had with the petite Miss L. So you'll have to forgive any stupidities of mine, which may crudely crop up in the body of this correspondence.

My first impression of Miss Locher, as she positioned herself almost sidesaddle in a leather chair before me, was that of a tense and disturbed but basically efficient and self-seeking young woman. She was dressed and accessorized, I noticed, in much the classic style, which you normally favor. I won't go into our first-visit preliminaries here (though we can discuss these and other matters at dinner this Saturday if only you are willing). After a brief while we zeroed in on

the girl's immediate impetus for consulting me. This involved, as you may or may not know, a distressing dream she had recently suffered. What will follow, as I have composed them from my tape of the September 10th session, are the events of that dream.

In the dream our subject has entered into a new life, at least to the extent that she holds down a different job from her waking one. She had already informed me that for some five years she'd worked as a secretary for a tool and die firm. (And could this possibly be your delicate touch? Tooling into oblivion.) However, her working day in the dream finds her as a long-time employee of a fashionable clothes shop. Like those state witnesses the government wishes to hide with new identities, she has been outfitted by the dream with what seems to be a mostly tacit but somehow complete biography; a marvelous trick of the mind, this. It appears that the duties of her new job require her to change the clothes of the mannikins in the front window, this according to some mysterious and unfathomable schedule. She in fact feels as if her entire existence is slavishly given over to doing nothing but dressing and undressing these dummies. She is profoundly dissatisfied with her lot, and the mannikins become the focus of her animus.

Such is the general background presupposed by the dream, which now begins in proper. On a particularly gloomy day in her era of thralldom, our dummy dresser approaches her work. She is resentful and frightened, the latter emotion an irrational “given” at this point in the dream. An awesome load of new clothes is waiting to attire a window full of naked mannikins. Their unwarm, uncold bodies repel her touch. (Note this rare awareness of temperature in

a dream, albeit neutral.) She bitterly surveys the ranks of crayon-like faces and then says: “Time to stop dancing and get dressed, sleeping beauties.” These words are spoken without spontaneity, as if ritually used to inaugurate each dressing session. But the dream changes before the dresser is able to put one stitch on the dummies, who stare at nothing with “anticipating” eyes.

The working day is now finished. She has returned to her small apartment, where she retires to bed… and has a dream. (This dream is that of the mannikin dresser and not hers, she emphatically pointed out!)

The mannikin dresser dreams she is in her bedroom. But what she now thinks of as her “bedroom” is from all appearances actually an archaically furnished hall with the dimensions of a small theater. The room is dimly lit by some jeweled lamps along the walls, the lights shining “with a strange glaziness” upon an intricately patterned carpet and upon the massive pieces of antique and highly varnished furniture around the room. She perceives the objects of the scene more as pure ideas than physical things, for details are blurry and there are many shadows. One thing, though, she visualizes quite clearly as the dominant feature of the room: there is a wall that from the floor to the lofty ceiling is completely missing. In place of the absent wall is a view of star-clustered blackness, which she sees either through a great window or irrationally in the depths of an equally great mirror. In any case, this maze of stars and blackness appears as an enormous mural and suggests an uncertain location for a room formerly thought to be nestled at the cozy crossroads of well-known coordinates. Now it is truly just a lost point within an unknown universe of sleep.

The dreamer is positioned almost on the opposite side of the room from the brink of the starry abyss. Sitting on the edge of an armless, backless couch of complex brocade, she stares and waits “without breath or heartbeat,” these functions being quite unnecessary to her dream self. Everything is in silence. This silence, however, is somehow charged with strange currents of force, which she can't really explain, an insane physics electrifying the atmosphere with demonic powers lurking just beyond the threshold of sensory perception. All is perceived with elusive dream senses.

Then a new feeling enters the dream, one slightly more tangible. There seems to be an iciness drifting in from the area of the great mirror or window, perhaps now merely a windowless aperture looking out on the chilly void. Suddenly our dreamer experiences a cumulative terror of everything that has happened, is happening, or will happen to her. Without moving from her place on that uncomfortable couch, she visually searches the room for clues to the source of her terror. Many areas are inaccessible to her sight —like a picture that has been scribbled out in places—but she sees nothing specifically frightening and is relieved for a moment. Then her horror begins anew when she realizes for the first time that she hasn't looked behind her, and indeed she seems physically unable to do so now.

Something is back there. She feels this to be a horrible truth. She almost knows what the thing is, but afflicted with some kind of oneiric aphasia she cannot articulate any words or clear ideas to herself. She can only wait, hoping that sudden shock will soon bring her out of the dream, for she is now aware that “she is dreaming,” for some reason thinking of herself in the third person.

The words “she is dreaming” somehow form a ubiquitous motif for the present situation: as a legend written somewhere at the bottom of the dream, as echoing voices bouncing here and there around the room, as a motto printed upon fortune cookie-like strips of paper and hidden in bureau drawers, and as a broken record repeating itself on an ancient Victrola inside the dreamer's head. Then all the words of this monotonous slogan gather from their diverse places and like an alighting flock of birds settle in the area behind the dreamer's back. There they twitter for a moment, as upon the frozen shoulders of a statue in a park. This is actually the way it seems to the dreamer, including the statue comparison. Something of a statuesque nature is back there.

Approaching her. Something that is radiating a searing field of tension, coming closer, its great shadow falling across and enlarging her own there upon the floor. Still she cannot turn around, cannot move her body, which is stiff-jointed and rigid. Perhaps she can scream, she thinks, and makes an attempt to do so. But this fails, because by then there is already a firm and tepid hand that has covered her mouth from behind. The fingers on her lips feel like thick, naked crayons. Then she sees a long slim arm extending itself out over her left shoulder, and a hand that is holding some filthy rags before her eyes and shaking them, “making them dance.” And at that moment a dry sibilant voice whispers into her ear: “It's time to get dressed, little dolling.”

She tries to look away, her eyes being the only things she can still move. Now, for the first time, she notices that all around me room—in the shadowed places—are people dressed as dolls. Their forms are collapsed, their mourns

opened wide. They do not look as if they are still alive. Some of them have actually become dolls, their flesh no longer supple and their eyes having lost the appearance of moistness. Others are at various intermediate stages between humanness and dollhood. With horror, the dreamer now becomes aware that her own mouth is opened wide and will not close.

But at last, through the power of her fear, she is able to turn around and face her menacer. At this crescendo of the dream she awakes. She does not, however, awake in the bed of the mannikin dresser in her first and outer dream, but instead finds herself directly transported into the tangled, though real, bedcovers of her secretary self. Not exactly sure where or who she is for a moment, her first impulse on awaking is to complete the movement she began in the dream—that is, turning around to look behind her. The hypnopompic hallucination that followed she claims as a "strong motivating factor" in her seeking the powers of a psychiatrist. For when she turned around in her bed, there was more to see than a dumb headboard with a blank wall above. Projecting out of that moon-whitened wall was the anterior half of a head, the face upon it that of a female mannikin. And what particularly disturbed her about this illusion (and here we go deeper into already dubious realms) was that the head didn't melt away into the background of the wall the way other post-dream projections she'd seen in the past had done; but instead, this protruding head, in one smooth movement, withdrew back into the wall. Her screams summoned a few unsympathetic eavesdroppers from neighboring apartments.

End of dream and related experiences.

Now, my darling, you can probably imagine my reaction to the above psychic yarn. Every loose skein I followed led me back to you. The character of Miss Locher's dream is strongly reminiscent, in both mood and scenario, of matters you have been exploring for some years now. I'm referring, of course, to the all-around astral uncanniness of Miss Locher's dream and how eerily it echoes certain notions (very well, theories) that in my opinion have become altogether too central to your oeuvre as well as to your vie. Specifically I mean those “other worlds” you say you've detected through a combination of occult studies and depth analysis.

Let me digress for a brief lecture apropos of the preceding.

It's not that I object to your delving into speculative models of reality, sweetheart, but why this particular one? Why posit these “little zones,” as I've heard you call them, having such hideous attributes, or should I say anti-attributes (to keep up with your lingo). To whimsically joke about them, as I've heard you do, with phrases like “pockets of interference” and “cosmic static,” belies your talents as a thinker in general. And the rest of it: the hyper-uncanniness, the warped relationships that are supposed to obtain in these places, the “games with reality,” and all the other transcendent nonsense. I realize that psychology has charted some awfully weird areas in its maps of the mind, but you've gone so far into ultramental hinterlands of metaphysics that I fear you will not return (at least not with your reputation intact).

To speak of your ideas with regard to Miss Locher's dream, you can see the connections, especially in the tortuous and twisting plot of her narrative. But I'll tell you when these connections really struck me with a hammer blow. It

was just after she had related her dream to me. She was now riding the saddle of her chair in the normal position, and she made a few remarks obviously intended to convey the full extent of her distress. I'm sure she thought it de rigueur to tell me that after her dream episode she began entertaining doubts concerning who she really was. Secretary? Attirer of mannikins? Other? Other other? She knew, of course, the identity of her genuine, factual self; it was just some “new sense of unreality” that undermined complete assurance in this matter. (So what else is newrotic?)

Surely you can see how the above identity tricks fit in with those “harassments of the self” that you say are one of the characteristic happenings in these zones of yours. And just what are the boundaries of self? Is there a communion of all things or just some things? How do animate and inanimate relate? Really boring... zzzzz.

It all reminds me of that trite little fable of the Chinese (Chuang Tzu?) who dreamed he was a butterfly but upon waking affected not to know whether he was a man who'd dreamed he was a butterfly or a butterly now dreaming, etc. The question is, “Do things like butterflies dream?” (Ans.: no. Recall the lab studies on the subject, if you will for once.) The issue is ended right there. However—I'm sure you would continue—suppose the dreamer is not a man or butterfly, but both... or neither, something else altogether. Or suppose... really we could go on and on like this, and we have. Possibly the most repellent concept you've developed on this subject is that which you call “divine masochism,” or the doctrine of a Bigger Self terrorizing its little splinter selves, precisely that Something Else Altogether scarifying the man-

butterfly with uncanny suspicions that there's a game going on over its collective head.

The trouble with all this, my dear, is the way you're so convinced of its objective reality, and how you sometimes manage to infect others with your peculiar convictions. Me, for instance. After hearing Miss Locher tell her dream story, I found myself unconsciously analyzing it much as you might have. Her multiplication of roles (including the role reversal with the mannikin) really put me in mind of some divine being that was splintering and scaring itself to relieve its cosmic ennui, as indeed a few of the more conventional gods of world religion supposedly do. I also thought of your "divinity of the dream," that thing which is all-powerful in its own realm. Contemplating the realm of Miss Locher's dream, I came to deeply feel that old truism of a solipsistic dream deity commanding all it sees, all of which is only itself. And a corollary to solipsism even occurred to me: if in any dream of a universe one has to always allow that there is another, waking universe, and then the problem becomes, as with our self-scaring Chinese, knowing when one is actually dreaming and what form the waking self may have; and this one can never know. The fact that the overwhelming majority of thinkers reject any doctrine of solipsism suggests, perhaps, the basic horror and disgusting unreality of its implications. And after all, the horrific feeling of unreality is much more prevalent (to certain people) in what we call human "reality" than in human dreams, where everything is absolutely real.

See what you've done to me! For reasons that you well know, I always try to argue your case, my love. I can't help myself. But I don't think it's right to be exerting your influ-

ence upon innocents like Miss Locher. I should tell you that I hypnotized the girl. Her unconscious testimony seems very much to incriminate you. She almost demanded the hypnosis, feeling this to be an easy way of unveiling the source of her problems. And because of her frantic demands, I obliged her. A serendipitous discovery ensued.

She was an excellent subject. In hypnosis we restricted ourselves to penetrating the mysteries of her dream. I had her recount the events of the dream with the more accurate memory of her hypnotized state. Her earlier version was amazingly factual, only one thing missing, which I'll get to in a moment. I asked her to elaborate on her feelings in the dream and any sense of meaning she experienced. Her response to these questions was more in the incoherent language of delirium than literal sense, or even dream logic. She said some quite horrible things about life and lies and “this dream of flesh.” I don't think I need expand on the chilling nonsense she uttered, for I've heard you say much the same in one of your “states.” (Really, the way you dwell on and in your zones of the metaphysically flayed self is appalling.)

And you, my dear, were present in Miss Locher's hypnotic statement in more than just spirit. That little thing which Miss Locher mentioned only under hypnosis, and which I temporarily omitted above, was a very telling piece of info. It told on you. For when my patient first described the scenes of her dream drama to me, she had forgotten—or just neglected to mention—the presence of another character hidden in the background. This character was her boss at the clothes store and proprietor of the nameless establishment, played by a certain lady psychoanalyst. Not that you were

ever on stage, even in a cameo appearance. But the hypnotized Miss Locher did remark in passing on the identity of the employer of her oneiric self, this being one of the many underlying suppositions of the dream.

I found this revelation immensely helpful in coordinating my and my patient's separate items of evidence against you. The nature of the evidence, however, was such that I could not rule out the possibility of a conspiracy on your and Miss Locher's part. So I refrained from asking her anything about the relationship between you two, and I didn't inform her of what she said about you under hypnosis. My assumption was that she was guilty until proven otherwise.

Alternatives did occur to me, though, especially when I realized Miss Locher's extraordinary susceptibility to hypnosis. Isn't it just possible, sweet love, that Miss Locher's incredible dream was induced by one of those post-hypnotic suggestions, which you're so good at? I know that lab experiments in this area are sometimes eerily successful, and the eerie is, without argument, your specialty. Still another possibility involves the study of dream telepathy, in which you have no small interest. So what were you doing the night Miss Locher underwent her dream ordeal? (You weren't with me, I know that!) And how many of those eidola on my poor patient's mental screen were images projected from an outside source? These are just some of the bizarre questions, which lately seem so necessary to ask.

But the answers to such questions would still only establish your means in this crime. What about your motive? That I know very well, too well. It seems there is nothing you won't do to impose your ideas upon common humanity —deplorably on your patients, obnoxiously on your col-

leagues, and affectionately (I hope) on me. I know it must be hard for a lonely visionary like yourself to remain mute and ignored, but you've chosen such an eccentric path to follow that I fear there are few spirits brave enough to accompany you into those zones of deception and pain, at least not voluntarily.

Which brings us back to Miss Locher. By the end of our first, and only, session I still wasn't sure whether she was a willing or unwilling agent of yours; hence, I kept mum, very mum, about anything concerning you. Neither did she mention you in any significant way, except of course unconsciously in hypnosis. At any rate, she certainly appeared to be a genuinely disturbed young lady, and she asked me to prescribe for her. As Dr. Bovary tried to assuage the oppressive dreams of his wife with a prescription of valerian and camphor baths, I supplied Miss Locher with a program for serenity that included Valium and companionship (the latter of which I also recommend for us, dolling). Then we made a date for the following Wednesday at the same tune. Miss Locher seemed most grateful, though not enough, according to my secretary, to pay up what she owed. And wait till you find out where she wanted us to send the bill.

The following week Miss Locher did not appear for her appointment. This did not really alarm me, for, as you know many patients —armed with a script for tranquilizers and a single experience of therapy—decide they don't need any more help. But by men I had developed such a personal interest in Miss Locher's case that I was seriously disappointed at the prospect of not being able to pursue it further.

After fifteen patientless minutes had elapsed, I had my secretary call Miss Locher at the number she gave us. (With

my former secretary—poor thing—this would have been done automatically; so the new girl is not as good as you said she was, doctor. I shouldn't have let you insinuate her into my employ... but that's my fault, isn't it?) Maggie came into my office a few minutes later, presumably after she'd tried to reach Miss Locher. With rather cryptic impudence she suggested I dial the number myself, giving me the form containing all the information on our new patient. Then she left the room without saying another word. The nerve of that soon-to-be-unemployed girl.

I called the number—which incidentally plays the song about Mary's lamb on the push button phone in my office—and it rang twice before someone answered. This someone had the voice of a young woman but was not our Miss Locher. In any case, the way this woman answered the phone told me I had a wrong number (the right wrong number). Nevertheless, I asked if a Miss Locher could be reached at that number or any of its possible extensions, but the answering female's voice expressed total ignorance regarding the existence of any person by that name. I thanked her and hung up.

You will have to forgive me, my lovely, if at this point I had begun to feel like the victim of a hoax, your hoax to be exact. “Maggie,” I intercommed, “how many more appointments for this afternoon?”

“Just one,” she immediately answered, and then without being asked to, said: “But I can cancel it if you'd like.” I said I would like, that I would be gone for the rest of the afternoon.

My intention was to pay a visit on Miss Locher at the, probably also phony, address on her new patient form. I had

the suspicion that the address would lead to the same geographical spot as had the electronic nexus of the false phone number. Of course I could have easily verified this without leaving my office, but knowing you, sweet one, I thought that a personal visit was warranted. And I was right.

The address was an hour's drive away. It was in a fashionable suburb on the other side of town from that fashionable suburb in which I have my office. (And I wish you would remove your own place of business from its present location, unless for some reason you need to be near a skid-row source that broadcasts on frequencies of chaos and squalor, which you'd probably claim.) I parked my big black car on the street I was looking for, which also turned out to be the main street of the suburb's shopping district. Harwell Ave. is its name, as you know.

This was last Wednesday, and if you'll recall it was quite an unusual day (an accomplishment I do not list among all your orchestrated connivings of my adventure). It was dim and moody most of the morning, and so prematurely dark by late afternoon that there were stars seemingly visible in the sky. Presumably a storm was imminent—though I don't recollect our really having one—for the air was appropriately galvanized with a pre-deluge suspensefulness. The display windows of stores had on their nightlights, and one jewelry sellers I passed twinkled with electric glory in the corner of my eye. Shivering in the stillness were the little leaves upon a row of curbside trees, each slender trunk emerging from a complex mosaic planted in the sidewalk.

Of course, there's no further need to describe the atmosphere of a place you've visited many times, dear love. But I just wanted to show how sensitive I was to a certain kind of

portentous mood, and how ripe I'd become for the staged antics to follow. Very good, doctor!

Distance-wise, I only had to walk a few gloomy blocks before arriving at the address I sought, the address purported to be the home of our Miss L. By then it was pretty clear what I would find. There were no surprises so far. When I looked up at the neon-inscribed name of the place, I heard a young woman's telephone voice whispering the words into my ear: Mademoiselle Fashions. A fake French accent here, S.V.P. And this is the store—no?—where it seems you acquire so many of your own lovely ensembles. But I'm jumping ahead with my expectations.

What I did not expect were the sheer lengths to which you would go in setting up a weird experience and revelation for your beloved. Was this, I pray, done to bring us closer in the divine bonds of weirdness? Anyway, I saw what you wanted me to see, or what I thought you wanted me to see, or some combination of the two, in the window of Mlle. Fashions.

The thing was even wearing the same plaid-skirted outfit as, or one very similar to, the one worn by Miss Locher on her only visit to my office. And I have to admit that I was a bit shocked—perhaps attributable in part to the strange climatic conditions of the day—when I saw the head of the thing. Then again, I was looking for a resemblance and possibly made myself see an exaggerated likeness between Miss Locher (your fellow conspirator, whether she knows it or not) and the figure in the window. You can probably guess what I noticed, or thought I noticed, about the figure's eyes—what you would have had me think of as a partially human

moistness, like those metamorphosizing things in Miss Locher's dream.

Unfortunately, I was unable to linger long enough to positively confirm the above perception, for a medium-intensity shower began to descend at that point. The rain sent me running to a nearby phone booth, where I had some business to conduct anyway. Retrieving the number of the clothes store from my memory, I phoned them for the second time that afternoon. That was easy. What was not quite as easy was imitating your voice, my high-pitched love, and asking if the store's accounting department had mailed out a bill that month for my, I mean your, charge account. My impersonation of you must have been very good, for the voice on the phone reminded me that I'd already taken care of all my recent expenditures. You thanked the salesgirl for this information, apologizing for your forgetfulness, and then said good-bye. Perhaps I should have asked the girl if she was the one who helped rig up that mannikin in the window to look like Miss Locher, if indeed the situation was not the other way around. In any case, I did establish a definite link, of which I was almost sure beforehand, between you and the clothes store. It seemed you might have accomplices anywhere, and to tell you the truth I was beginning to feel a bit paranoid standing in that little phone booth.

The rain was coming down even harder as I made a mad dash back to my black sedan. A bit soaked, I sat in the car for a few moments wiping off my rain-spotted glasses with a handkerchief. I said I was becoming a bit paranoid and what follows proves it. While sitting there without my glasses on, I thought I saw something move in the rearview mirror. My visual vulnerability, combined with the claustrophobic feel-

ing of being in a car with rain-blinded windows, together added up to a momentary but very definite panic on my part. Of course I quickly put my glasses on and found there was nothing whatever in the backseat. But the point is that I had to check in order to relieve my spasm of anxiety. You had succeeded, my love, in getting me to experience a moment of self-terror, and in that moment I, too, became your accomplice against myself. Bravo!

You have indeed succeeded—assuming all my inferences thus far are for the most part true—perhaps more than you know or ever intended. Having confessed all this, possibly now I can get to the real focus and "motivating factor" of this correspondence. This has much less to do with A. Locher than it does with us, dearest. Please try to be sympathetic and, above all, patient.

I have not been well lately, and you well know the reason why. This business with Miss Locher, far from bringing us to a more intimate understanding of each other, has only made the situation worse. Horrible nightmares have been plaguing me every night. Me, of all people! And they are directly due to the well-intentioned (I think) influence of you and Miss L. I'll describe one of these nightmares for you, and therefore describe them all. This will be the last dream story, I promise.

In the dream I am in my bedroom, sitting upon my unmade bed and wearing my pajamas (Oh, will you never see them). The room is partially illuminated by beams from a streetlight shining in through the window from outside. And it also seems to me that a whole galaxy of constellations, although not actually witnessed firsthand, are contributing their light to the scene, a ghastly glowing which unnaturally

blanches the entire upstairs of the house. I have to use the bathroom and walk sleepily out to the hallway… where I get the shock of my life.

In the whitened hallway—I cannot say brightened, because it is almost as if a very fine and luminous powder coats everything—are these things lying up and down the floor, on the upper landing of the stairway, and even upon the stairs themselves as they disappear into the darker regions below. These things are people dressed as dolls, or else dolls made up to look like people dressed as dolls. I remember being confused about which it was.

But people or dolls, their heads are all turned in my direction as I emerge from the bedroom, and their eyes shine in the white darkness. Frozen—yes, with terror—I merely return a fixed gaze, for some reason wondering if my eyes are shining the same as theirs. Then one of the doll people, slouching against the wall on my near left, turns its head laboriously upon a stiffened neck and looking upward speaks to me. Its voice is an horrific cackling parody of speech, but even more horrible are its words. It says: “Become as we are, sweetie. Die into us.” Suddenly I begin to feel very weak, as if my life were being drained out of me. Summoning all my powers of movement, I manage to rush back to my bed to end the dream.

I don't wake up until the next morning, and even then my heart pounds like anything. This very much disturbs me, for I've read studies of the relationship between nightmares and heart attacks. For some poor souls that imaginary incubus sitting upon their chest can do very real harm. And I do not want to become one of these cases.

You can help me, sweetheart. I know you didn't intend it to turn out this way but that elaborate joke you perpetrated with the help of Miss Locher has really gotten to me. Consciously, of course, I still uphold the criticism I've already expressed about the basic silliness of your work. Unconsciously, however, you seem to have awakened me to a stratum (zone, you would say) of uncanny terror in my mind-soul. I will at least admit that your ideas form a powerful psychic metaphor, though no more than that. Which is quite enough, isn't it? It's certainly quite enough to inspire the writing of this letter, in which I now beg you to get in touch with me so that we can resolve this whole situation. I can't go on like this! You have strange powers over me, as if you didn't already know it. Please release me from your spell, and let's begin a normal romance. Who really gives a damn about the metaphysics of invisible realms anyway? It's only emotions, not abstractions, which count. Love and terror are the true realities, whatever the unknowable mechanics are that turns their wheels, and our own.

In Miss Locher I believe you sent me a concrete message of your deepest convictions, a love note if you will. But suppose I start admitting weird things about Miss L? Suppose I admit that she was somehow just a dream. (Then she must have been my secretary's dream too, for she saw her.) Suppose I even admit that Miss Locher was not a girl but actually a multi-selved thing—part Man, part mannikin—and with your assistance dreamed itself for a time into existence, reproduced itself in human form just as we reproduce ourselves with an infinite variety of images and shapes, including mannikins? You would like to have me think of things like this. You would like to have me think of all the

mysterious connections between different things. So what if there are? I don't care anymore.

Forget other selves. Forget the third (fourth, nth) person view of life; only first and second persons are important (I and thou). And by all means forget dreams. I, for one, know I'm not a dream. I am real, Dr. ——. (There, how do you like being anonymized?) So please be so kind as to acknowledge my existence.

It is now after midnight, and I dread going to sleep and having another of those nightmares. You can save me from this fate, if only you can find it in your heart to do so. And you must hurry. Time is running out for us, my love, just as these last few waking moments are now running out for me. It is late in the night but still not too late for our love. Please don't destroy everything for us. You will only hurt yourself. And despite your high-flown theory of masochism, there is really nothing divine about it. So no more of your tricks with strange places and communications. Be simple. Good night, and then.

Good night, my foolish love. Hear me now. Sleep your singular sleep and dream of the many, the others. They are also part of you, part of us. Die into them and leave me in peace. I will come for you later, and then you can always be with me in a special corner all your own, just as my little Amy once was. This is what you've wanted, and this you shall have. Die into them. Yes, die into them, you simple man, you fool, you lover, you silly dolling. Die with a nice bright gleam in your eyes.

Drink To Me Only With Labyrinthine Eyes (2010 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

First published in *Nyctalops #17*, 1982

Everyone at the party comments on them. They ask if I had them altered in some way, suggest that I've tucked some strange crystallized lenses under my eyelids. I tell them no, that I was born with these singular optic organs. They're not from some optometrist's bag of tricks, not the result of surgical mayhem. Of course they find this hard to believe, especially when I tell them I was also born with the full powers of a master hypnotist... and from there I rapidly evolved, advancing into a mesmeric wilderness untrod before or since by any others of my calling. No, I wouldn't say *business* or *profession*, I would have to say *calling*. What else do you call it when you're destined from birth, marked by fate's stigmata? At this point they smile politely, saying that they really enjoyed the show and that I certainly am good at what I do. I tell them how grateful I am for the opportunity to perform for such fancy persons in such a fancy house. Unsure to what extent I'm just kidding them, they nervously twirl the stems of their champagne glasses, the beverage sparkling and the crystal twinkling under a chandelier's kaleidoscopic blaze. Despite all the beauty, power, and prestige socializing in this rather baroque room tonight, I think they know how

basically ordinary they all are. They are very impressed by me and my assistant, who have been asked to mingle with the guests and amuse them in whatever way we can. One gentleman with a flushed face looks across the room at my partner in animal magnetism, guzzling his drink as he does so. “Would you like to meet her,” I ask. “You bet,” he replies. They all do. They all want to know you, my angel.

Earlier in the evening we presented our show to these lovely people. I instructed the host of the party to serve no alcohol before our performance, and to arrange the furniture of this overwrought room in a way that would allow everyone a perfect view of us on our little platform. He complied obediently, of course. He also conceded to my request for payment in advance. Such an agreeable man, giving in to the will of another so readily.

At the start of the show I am alone before a silent audience. All illumination is cancelled except a single spotlight which I have set up on the floor exactly two point two meters from the stage. The spotlight focuses on a pair of metronomes, their batons sweeping back and forth in perfect unison like windshield wipers in the rain: smoothly back and smoothly forth, back and forth, back and forth. And at the tip of each baton is a replica of each of my eyes swaying left and right in full view of everyone, while my voice speaks to them from a shadowy edge of the stage. First I give a brief lecture on hypnosis, its name and nature. After that I say: “Ladies and gentlemen: Please direct your attention to this glossy black cabinet. Within stands the most beautiful creature you have ever beheld. From heaven itself she has descended, a seraph of the highest order. And for your enjoyment she is already in the deepest trance. You *will*

see her and be amazed." There is a dramatic pause during which my eyes fix upon the congregation before me, keeping control of them. When I look back toward the cabinet the trick door opens, seemingly of its own will.

As if with one voice, the audience emits a quiet gasp, and for a second I panic. Then there is applause, reassuring me that everything is all right, that they like the figure exhibited before them. What they see is standing upright inside the cabinet, her slender arms held absolutely still at her sides. She is wearing a tiny sequined outfit, a vulgar costume whose rampant glitter somehow transcends the cliché, rejuvenating its shoddy soul. Her eyes are two bluish gems in an alabaster setting, and her gaze seems to be fixed on infinity. After the audience has had a good look, I say: "Now, my angel, you must fall." At this signal she begins to totter within the box. Finally she teeters into a forward topple. At the last moment I reach down, collar her throat with one hand, and arrest her inflexible figure a few inches before it hits the stage. Not a lock of her golden hair is stirred out of place, and her bejeweled tiara holds tightly to her head. There is applause while I restore my long-limbed assistant to a vertical position.

Now begins the performance proper, which is an array of mesmeric stunts along with some magic. I place the somnambule's hypnotically stiffened body horizontally between two chairs and ask some behemoth from the audience to come up and sit on her. The man is only too glad to do this. Then I command the somnambule to become inhumanly limp so that I may stuff her into an impossibly small box. But she's only limber enough to fit halfway into the receptacle, I tell the audience. So I inform them that I must break

her neck and other bones in order to push her whole body inside. All onlookers are on the edge of their seats, and I beg them to remain composed even though they may see some blood squeeze out the edges of the box as I close its lid. They love it when my assistant slowly rises up intact and unbloodied. (Nonetheless, like all crowds who attend events where there is, or seems to be, an element of hazard, they secretly wish to see something go wrong.) Next is the Human Voodoo Doll, wherein I stick long pins into her flesh and she doesn't wince or make a sound. We perform quite a few other routines in defiance of death and pain, afterward moving on to the memory tricks. In one of them I have everybody in the audience call out in quick succession his or her full name and birth date. Then I instruct my somnambule to repeat this information when requested at random to do so by individual audience members. She gets all the names right—and of course everyone is bowled over—but invariably the dates she gives are not in the past but in the future. Some of the days and years she mechanically speaks are relatively distant in time and some disturbingly near. I express astonishment at my somnambule's behavior, explaining to the audience that fortune-telling is not normally part of the show. I apologize for this woeful display of precognition and vow to make it up to them with a jaw-dropping finale so as to sidetrack their minds from any morbid introspection. A blare of heavenly horns would not be inappropriate at this point.

At my signal, my assistant moves to the precise center of the stage. Here she positions herself with legs outspread to form an upside-down V out of her lower body. Another signal and her arms elevate until they are stretched outward like two wings, both tensely straining to their limit. A final

signal bids her nodding head to lift fully erect upon the muscle-knotted column of her neck, eyes glaring out at the audience. At the same time, the eyes out in the audience glare back at her with the same gaze. “Now,” I admonish them, “there must be total silence. This means no coughing, no sniffing, no yawning, and no clearing of throats.” An unreasonable directive, it would seem, but one with which they are compliant. They are silent as a grave full of buried confidences. “Ladies and gentlemen,” I continue, “you are about to see something that I need not tout with a verbose preamble. My assistant is now in the deepest possible trance and every particle of her being is extremely sensitive to my will. When instructed, she will begin an astounding metamorphosis that will reveal what some of you may have conceived but never dared hope to look upon. Nothing more need be said. My dear, you may commence your change of form, code name: Seraphim.”

There she stands—arms, legs, towering head—my five-pointed somnambule: a star. “Already you can see the glowing,” I tell the audience. “She begins to effloresce. She begins to incandesce. And now she approaches such radiance that she almost disappears into it—kindled to the very edge of worldly existence by a supernal blaze. But there is no pain, there is anything but eyesore.” No one in the audience is even squinting, of course, for the beams from her body—this labyrinth of light!—are dream beams without physical properties. “Keep watching,” I shout at them, pointing to my assistant, whose costume of foil sequins has turned to a gossamer veil floating about her form. “Can you see snow-white wings sprouting beyond the horizon of her shoulders? Has not her material casing lost all carnality and transmogrified

into a celestial icon? Is she not the very essence of the ethereal—the angelic luminary beneath the human beast?"

But I cannot sustain the moment. The light fades in the eyes of the audience, growing dimmer by the second, and my assistant collapses back into an earthly incarnation. I am exhausted. What's worse, all our efforts seem to have been wasted, for the audience answers this spectacle with only perfunctory applause. I can hardly believe it, but the finale fell flat. They don't understand. They actually like all the mock-death and bogus-pain stuff better. These are what fascinate them. Bah. Double bah. Well, frolic while can, you dullards. The show isn't over yet.

"Thank you, ladies and gentlemen," I say when the lights go up and the meager applause dies entirely. "I hope my assistant and I have not induced you into somnolence this evening. You do look a little sleepy, as if you've been lulled into a trance yourselves. Which is not such a bad feeling, is it? Sinking deep into a downy darkness, resting your souls on pillows stuffed with soft shadows. But our host informs me that things will liven up very soon. Certainly you will awake when a little chime commands you to do so. Remember, it's wake-up time when you hear the chime," I repeat. "And now I believe we can prosecute this evening's festivities."

I help my assistant down from the platform and we mix with the rest of the partiers. Drinks are served and the noise level in the room increases by several decibels. The populace of the soirée begins to coagulate into groups here and there. I separate myself from a boisterous group surrounding my assistant and me, but nobody seems to notice. They are entranced by my sequined somnambule. She dazzles them—a

sun at the center of a drab galaxy, her costume catching the light of that monstrous chandelier winking with a thousand eyes. Everyone seems to be trying to gain her regard. But she just smiles, so vacant and full of grace, not even sipping the drink someone has placed in her hand. They are transfixed like lady spiders during the mating ritual. After all, didn't I tell them that my lanky hypnotizee was the perfection of beauty?

But I too have my admirers. One dark-suited bore asks me if I can help him stop smoking. Another inquires about possible ways that hypnosis could serve as a tool for his advertising business, though nothing illegal of course. I hand them each a business card with a cloud-gray pearl finish on which is printed a non-existent phone number and a phony address in a real city. As for the name: Cosimo Fanzago. What else would one expect from a performing mesmerist extraordinaire? I have other cards with names like Gaudenzio Ferrari and Johnny Tiepolo printed on them. Nobody's caught on yet. But am I not as much an artist as they were?

And while I am being accosted by people who need cures or aids for their worldliness, I am watching you, dear somnambule. Watching you waltz about this magnificent room. It is not like the other rooms in this great house. Someone really let Fancy have its wild way in here. It harkens back to a time, centuries ago, when your somnambulating predecessors did their sleepwalking act for high society. You fit in so well with the company of this manor hall of riotous rococo. It's a delight to see you make your way about the irregular circumference of this room, where the wall undulates in gentle waves and troughs, its surface sinewed with a maze of chinoiserie. This capacious chamber's serpentine configura-

tion makes it difficult to distinguish its recesses from its protrusions. Some of the guests shift their weight wallwards and find themselves leaning on air, stumbling sideways like comedians in an old movie. But you, my perfect sleepwalker, have no trouble. You lean at the right times and in the right places. And your eyes play beautifully to whatever camera focuses on you. Indeed, you take so many of your cues from others that one might suspect you of having no life of your own. Let's sincerely hope not!

Now I watch as a stuffed shirt in a dinner jacket invites you to be seated in a chair of blinding brocade, its flowery fabric done up in all the soft colors of a woman's cosmetics case and its dainty arms the texture of cartilage. Your high heels make subtle points in the carpet, puncturing its arabesque flights of imagination. Now I watch as our host draws you over to choose a libation from his well-stocked bar. He gestures with pride toward the many bottles on display, their shapes both *normale* and *baroque*. The baroquely shaped bottles are doing more interesting things with light and shadow than their normal brothers, and you point to one of these with a robotic finesse. He pours two drinks while you watch, and while you watch I am watching you watch. Guiding you to another part of the room, he shows you a shelf of delicate figurines, each one caught in a paralyzed stance. He places one of them in your hand, and you angle it every which way before your unfocused eyes, as if trying to restore some memory that would cause you to awaken. But you never will, not without my help.

Now he directs you to a part of the room where there is soft music and dancing. But there are no windows in this room, only tall smoky mirrors, and as you pass from one end

to the other you are caught between foggy looking-glasses facing their twins, creating endless files of somnambules in a false infinity beyond the walls. Then you dance with our host, though while he is gazing straightforwardly at you, you are gazing abstractly at the ceiling. Oh, that ceiling! In epic contrast to the capricious volutions of the rest of the room—designs tendriled to tenebrosity—the surface above is a plane of powder blue without a hint of flourish. In its purity it suggests a bottomless pool or a sky wiped clean of clouds. You are dancing in eternity, my darling. And the dance is indeed a long one, for another wants to cut in on our gracious host and become your partner. Then another. And another. They all want to embrace you. They are all taken in by your dispassionate elegance, your postures and poses like frozen roses. I am only waiting until everyone has had physical contact with your physique so full of animal magnetism.

And while I watch and wait, I notice that we have an unexpected spectator looking down on us from above. Beyond the wide archway at the end of the room is a staircase leading to the second floor. And up there he is sitting, trying to glimpse all the grown-ups, his pajama-clad legs dangling between the Doric posts of the balustrade. I can tell he prefers the classic decor elsewhere predominating in this house. With moderate stealth I leave the main floor audience behind and pay a visit to the balcony, which I quite ignored during my performance earlier.

After creeping up the triple-tiered stairway and sneaking down the white-carpeted hallway, I sit beside the child. “Did you see my little show with the lady?” I ask him. He shakes his head in the negative, his mouth as tight as an unopened tulip. “Can you see the lady now? You know the one I mean.”

I take a shiny chrome-plated pen from the inside pocket of my coat and point down toward the room where the party is going on. At this distance the features of my sequined siren cannot be seen in any great detail. “Well, can you see her?” His head bobs in the affirmative. Then I whisper: “And what do you think?” His two lips open and casually reply: “She... she's yucky.” I breathe easier now. From this height she does indeed appear merely “yucky,” but you can never know what the sharp sight of children may perceive. And it is certainly not my intention tonight to make any child's eyes roll the wrong way.

“Listen closely to everything I say,” I tell him in a very soft but not condescending tone, making sure the child's attention is held by my voice and by the gleaming pen on which his eyes are now focused. He is a good subject for a child, who ordinarily have wandering eyes and minds. He agrees with me that he is feeling rather tired now. “Now go back to your bed. You will fall asleep in seconds and have the most wonderful dreams. And you will not awaken until morning, *no matter what sounds you hear outside your door*. Understand?” He nods. “Very good. And for being such an agreeable young man, I'm going to make you a present of this beautiful pen of sterling silver which you will keep with you always as a reminder that nothing is what it seems to be. Do you know what I'm talking about?” His head moves up and down, and the expression on his face has the chilling appearance of deep wisdom. “All right, then. But before you return to your room, I want you to tell me if there's a back stairway by which I may leave.” His finger points down the hall and to the left. “Thank you, my boy. Thank you very

much. Now off to bed and to your sweet dreams." He disappears into the Piranesian darkness at the end of the hallway.

For a moment I stand staring down into that merry room below, where the crass laughter and doltish dancing of my audience has reached a climax. My fickle somnambule herself seems to be caught up in the party's web, and has forgotten all about her master. She's left me on the sidelines, a mazy wallflower. But I'm not jealous. I can understand why they've taken you away from me. They simply can't help themselves, now can they? I told them how beautiful, how perfect you were, and they can't resist you, my love.

Unfortunately they failed to appreciate the best part of you, preferring to lose themselves in the beguilements of your grosser illusions. Didn't I show our well-behaved audience an angelified version of you? And you saw their reaction. They were bored and just sat in their seats like a bunch of stiffs. Of course, what can you expect? They wanted the death stuff, the pain stuff. All that flashy junk. They wanted cartwheels of agony; somersaults through fires of doom; nosedives of vulnerable flesh into the meat grinder of life. They wanted to be *thrilled*.

And now that their merry pageant seems to have reached its peak, I think the time is right to awaken this mob from its hypnotic slumber and thrill the daylights out of them.

It is time for the chime.

There is indeed a back stairway just where the boy indicated, one which guides me to a back hallway, back rooms, and finally a back door. These backways lead me to a vast yard where a garden is silhouetted beneath the moon and a small wood sways in the distance. A thick lawn pads my foot-

steps as I work my way around to the fine façade of this house.

I am standing on the front porch now, between its tall columns and beneath a lamp hanging at the end of a long brazen chain. I pause for a moment, savoring each voluptuous second. The serene constellations above wink knowingly. But not even these eyes are deep enough to outgaze me, to deceive the deceiver, illude the illusionist. To tell the truth, I am a very bad mesmeric subject, unable to be drawn in by Hypnos' Heaven. For I know how easily one can be led past those shimmering gates, only to have a trap door spring open once you are inside. Then down you go! I would rather be the attendant loitering outside Mesmer's Maze than its deluded victim bumbling about within.

It is said that death is a great awakening, an emergence from the mystifications of life. Ha, I have to laugh. Death is the consummation of mortality and—to let out a big secret—only heightens mortal imperfections. Of course, it takes a great master to pry open a pair of post-mortem eyes once they are sewn tightly closed by Dr. Reaper. And even afterward there is so little these creatures are good for. As conversationalists they are incredibly feeble. The things they tell you are no more than sweet nullities. Nevertheless, they do have their uses, provided I can manage to get their awkward forms out of the mausoleum, hospital, morgue, medical school, or funeral emporium I have deviously insinuated my way into. When the mood strikes me, I recruit them for my show. Absent of any will of their own, they are exceptional at doing what they're told. However, there is one great problem: *you just can't make them beautiful*. One is not a sorcerer!

But perhaps one is a superlative mentalist, a preternaturally adept hypnotist. Then one may prompt an audience to perceive his departed subject as beautiful, to mistake her for a spellbinding, snake-eyed charmer. One *can* do this at least.

Even now I hear those high-society vulgarians still laughing, still dancing, still making a fuss over my charismatic doll of the dead. We showed them what you might be, Seraphita. Now let's show them what you really are. I have only to press this little button of a doorbell to sound the chime which will awaken them, to send the toll rolling throughout the house. Then they'll see the sepulchral wounds: your eyes recessed in their sockets, sunken into a rotting profundity—those labyrinthine depths! They'll wake up and find their nice dancing clothes all clotted with putrescent goo. And wait'll they get a sniff of that stiff. They *will* be amazed.

Drink To Me Only With Labyrinthine Eyes (1989 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

First published in *Nyctalops* #17, 1982

Everyone at the party comments on them. They ask if I had them altered in some way, suggest that I've tucked some strange crystallized lenses under my eyelids. I tell them no, that I was born with these singular optic organs; they're not from some optometrist's bag of tricks, not the result of surgical mayhem. Of course they find this hard to believe, especially when I tell them I was also born with the full powers of a master hypnotist... and from there I rapidly evolved, advancing into a mesmeric wilderness untrod before or since by any others of my calling. No, I wouldn't say business or profession, I would have to say calling. What else do you call it when you're destined from birth, marked by fate's stigmata? At this point they smile politely, saying that they really enjoyed the show and that I certainly am good at what I do. I tell them how grateful I am for the opportunity to perform for such fancy persons in such a fancy house. Unsure to what extent I'm just kidding them, they nervously twirl the stems of their champagne glasses, the beverage sparkling and the crystal twinkling under a chandelier's kaleidoscopic blaze. Despite all the beauty, power, and prestige socializing in this rather baroque room tonight, I think they know how

basically ordinary they all are. They are very impressed by me and my assistant, who have been asked to mingle with the guests and amuse them in whatever way we can. One gentleman with a flushed face looks across the room at my assistant, guzzling his drink as he does so. “Would you like to meet her,” I ask. “You bet,” he replies. They all do; they all want to know you, my somnambule.

Earlier in the evening we presented our show to these lovely people. I instructed the host of the party to serve no alcohol before our performance, and to arrange the furniture of this wonderfully ornate room in a way that would allow everyone a perfect view of us on our little platform. He complied obediently, of course. He also conceded to my request for payment in advance. Such an agreeable man, giving in to the will of another so readily.

At the start of the show I am alone before a silent audience. All illumination is cancelled except a single spotlight which I have set up on the floor exactly two point two meters from the stage. The spotlight focuses on a pair of metronomes, their batons sweeping back and forth in perfect unison like windshield wipers in the rain: smoothly back and smoothly forth, back and forth, back and forth. And at the tip of each baton is a luminous replica of each of my eyes swaying left and right in full view of everyone, while my voice speaks to them from a shadowy edge of the stage. First I give a brief lecture on hypnosis, its name and nature. After that I say: “Now, Ladies and Gentlemen, please direct your attention to that tall black cabinet with the stunning gold embellishments running riot upon its surface. Within stands the most beautiful creature you have ever laid eyes on. She is everything you can imagine in the way of

physical perfection. Everything. And just for you she is already in the deepest trance. You *will* see her." There is a dramatic pause during which my eyes fix upon that beast of a congregation, keeping my control. Then I look back toward the cabinet and softly utter the simple but strategic words: "Darling, you may come out now."

The trick door opens, seemingly of its own will. Suddenly the audience emits a quiet gasp, and for a second I panic. Then there is applause, reassuring me that everything is all right, that they like the thing they see within the cabinet. What they see is standing upright inside, almost as tall as the cabinet itself. She is wearing a tiny outfit entirely of sequins, a vulgar costume whose rampant glitter somehow transcends the cliché, resurrecting its vaudevillian soul. Her gaze is fixed on an infinity slightly above the heads of everyone. "Darling?" I say invitingly. At this pre-arranged signal she begins to totter within the box. Finally she teeters into a forward fall, straight down toward the hard surface of the stage. At the last moment I rush over and catch her rigid and unflinching figure before it hits. There is applause while I restore her to a vertical position.

Now begins the performance proper, which is a regimented array of the usual mesmerian gimmicks. I place the somnambule's hypnotically stiffened body horizontally between two chairs and ask some behemoth from the audience to come up and sit on her. The man is only too glad to do this. Then I command the somnambule to become inhumanly limp, after which I stuff her into a small box which resembles a coffin. (And inwardly I titter at my tasteless joke.) Next I fire a gun loaded with blanks straight at her, not six inches from her face, and she doesn't wince one bit. We

perform a few other routines in defiance of death and pain, afterward moving on to the memory tricks. In one of them I have everybody in the audience call out in turn his or her full name and birthdate. Then my somnambule repeats this information when requested at random to do so by individual audience members. She gets all the names right—and of course everyone is amazed—but she systematically fails to reply with the right dates. Instead she forecasts a future occasion which never coincides with the birthdate she was given. Some of the years of the dates she offers are in distant posterity and some disturbingly near. I express astonishment at my somnambule's behavior, explaining to the audience that portentous fortune-telling is not normally part of the show. I apologize for this ominous display of clairvoyance and vow to make it up to them with an unbelievably diverting finale. A blare of heavenly horns would not be inappropriate at this point.

I signal my assistant to move to the precise center of the stage. Here she positions herself with legs outspread to form an upside-down V out of her lower body. Another signal from me, and her arms rise slowly until they are stretched outward to their furthest limit, fingertips tensely straining for that extra millimeter or so. A final signal commands her nodding head to lift fully erect upon the muscle-knotted column of her neck, eyes glaring out at the audience. The eyes beyond the edge of the stage glare back at her with the same gaze. “Now,” I admonish them with poised palm, “there must be total silence. This means no coughs, no sniffs, no clearing of throats.” And they obey this unreasonable command; their bodies are silent, for I am their master. They are a noiseless maze of flesh. “Ladies and Gentlemen,”

I continue, “you are about to see something that I need not tout with tawdry preliminaries. My assistant is now in the deepest possible trance. The particles of her being are obeisant to forces beyond mundane existence, beyond life, death, and so on and so forth. At my instruction she will begin an astounding metamorphosis—entirely through the power of hypnotic energy—which will reveal to you one of the multitudinous unseen facets of the human diamond. Nothing more need be said. My dear, you may commence your change of form, code name: Sarah McFinn.”

There she stands—arms, legs, towering head—my five-pointed somnambule: a star. “Already you can see the glowing,” I tell the audience. “She begins to luminesce; she begins to effloresce; and now she approaches such radiance that up here on stage. I am nearly blinded. But there is no pain, there is anything but eyesore.” No one in the audience is even squinting, I notice, for the beams from her body—this labyrinth of light!—are dream beams without physical properties. “Keep watching,” I shout at them, pointing to the human luminary. “Are those snow-white wings you see sprouting beyond the horizon of her shoulders? Have the slender lengths of her arms, her legs, her neck all turned to a quivering, angelified alabaster? Is she not the very image of celestiality discarnate?”

But I cannot sustain the moment. The light fades in the eyes of the audience, growing dimmer by the second, and my assistant collapses back into an earthly incarnation. I am exhausted. What's worse, all our efforts seem to have been wasted, for the audience answers this spectacle with only perfunctory applause. I can hardly believe it, but the finale fell flat. They don't understand. They actually like all the

mock-death and bogus-pain stuff better. These are what fascinates them. Bah. Double bah.

"Thank you, Ladies and Gentlemen," I say when the lights come back on and the meager applause dies entirely. "I hope my beautiful assistant and I haven't bored you too much this evening. You do look a little sleepy, as if you've been lulled into a trance yourselves. Which is not such a bad feeling, is it? Sinking deep into a downy darkness, resting your souls on pillows stuffed with soft shadows. But our host informs me that things will liven up very soon. Certainly you will awake when a little chime commands you to do so. Remember, it's wake-up time when you hear the chime," I repeat. "And now I believe we can prosecute this evening's festivities."

I help my assistant down from the platform and we mix with the rest of the partiers. Drinks are served and the noise level in the room rises several decibels. The party's populace begins to coagulate into groups here and there. I separate myself from a boisterous congregation surrounding my assistant and me, but nobody seems to notice. They are entranced with my sequined somnambule. She dazzles them—a sun at the center of a drab galaxy, her costume catching the light of that monstrous chandelier winking with a thousand eyes. Everyone seems to be trying to command her attention; but she just smiles, so vacant and full of grace, not even sipping the drink some lucky person was allowed to place in her slender hand. They are transfixed, just like lady spiders during the mating ritual. After all, didn't I tell them that my lanky hypnotizee was their very own vision of fleshly perfection? And perfection is master! Or at least one's idea of it.

But I too have my admirers. One dark-suited bore asks me if hypnosis can help him stop drinking; another inquires if I can show him and his partners the way to undiscovered realms of wealth. I hand them each a business card with a cloud-gray pearl finish, on which is printed a non-existent phone number and a phony address in a real city. As for the name: Cosimo Fanzago. What else would one expect from a performing mesmerist extraordinaire. I have other cards with names like Gaudenzio Ferrari and Johnny Tiepolo printed on them. Nobody's caught on yet. But am I not as much an artist as they were?

And while I am being accosted by people who need cures or aids for their worldliness, I am watching you, dear somnambule. Watching you waltz about this remarkable room. It is not like the other rooms in this great house. Someone really let fancy have its wild way in here. It harkens back to a time, centuries ago, when your somnambulating predecessors did their sleepwalking act for high society. You fit in so well with this room of leftover rococo. It's a delight to see you make your way about the irregular circumference of this room, where the wall undulates in gentle peaks and hollows, its surface sinewed with a maze of chinoiserie. The serpentine pattern makes it difficult to distinguish the wall's recesses from its protusions. Some of the guests shift their weight wallwards and find themselves leaning on air, stumbling sideways like comedians from an old movie. But you, my perfect sleepwalker, have no trouble; you lean at the right times and in the right places. And your eyes play beautifully to whatever camera focuses on you; indeed, you take so many of your cues from others that one might suspect you of having no life of your own. Let's sincerely hope not!

Now I watch as you are encouraged to be seated in an elegant chair of blinding brocade, its delicate arms the texture of cartilage and its color like some powdery disc in a woman's cosmetics case. Your high heels make subtle points in the intricate scheme of the carpet, puncturing its arabesque flights of imagination. Now I watch as our host draws you over to the bait he has hospitably set up in this cornerless room. He waves his hand and indicates to you the many bottleshapes to choose from, shapes both *normale* and *baroque*. The baroquely shaped bottles are doing more interesting things with light and shadow than their normal brothers, and you select one of these with a gesture of robotic finesse. He pours two drinks while you watch, and while you watch I am watching you watch. Guiding you to another part of the room, he shows you a tableful of delicate figurines, each one caught in a paralyzed stance of some ancient dance. He places one of them in your hand, and you pass it back and forth before your unfocused eyes, as if trying to awaken yourself with this distraction of movement. But you never will, not without my help.

Now he directs you to a part of the room where there is soft music and dancing. But there are no windows in this room, only tall smoky mirrors, and as you pass from one end to the other you are caught between foggy looking-glasses facing their twins, creating endless files of somnambules in a false infinity beyond the walls. Then you dance with our host, though while he is gazing straightforwardly at you, you are gazing abstractly at the ceiling. O, that ceiling! In epic contrast to the capricious volutions of the rest of the room —designs tendriled to tenebrosity—the ceiling is a dark, chalky blue without a hint of flourish. In its purity it sug-

gests a bottomless pool or an infinite sky wiped clean of stars. You are dancing in eternity, my quadrillioning manniquin. And the dance is indeed a long one, for another wants to cut in on our gracious host and become your partner. Then another. And another. They all want to embrace you; they are all taken in by your frigid elegance, your postures and poses like frozen roses. I am only waiting until everyone has had bodily contact with your powers of animal magnetism.

And while I watch and wait, I notice that we have an unexpected spectator looking down on us from above. Beyond the wide archway at the end of the room is a staircase leading to the second- floor; and up there he is sitting, trying to glimpse all the grown-ups, his pajama-clad legs dangling between the Doric posts of the balustrade. I can tell he prefers the classic decor elsewhere predominating in this house. With moderate stealth I leave the main floor audience behind and pay a visit to the balcony, which I quite ignored during my performance earlier.

Creeping up the triple-tiered and white-carpeted stairway, I sit down on the floor beside the child. “Did you see my little show with the lady?” I ask him. He shakes his head horizontally, his mouth as tight as an unopened tulip. “Can you see the lady now? You know the one I mean.” I take a shiny chrome-plated pen from the inside pocket of my coat and point down toward the room where the party is going on. At this distance the features of my sequined siren cannot be seen in any great detail. “Well, can you see her?” His head bobs on the vertical. Then I whisper: “And what do you think?” His two lips open and casually reply: “She… she's yucky.” I breathe easier now. From this height she does in-

deed appear merely “yucky,” but you can never know what the sharp sight of children may perceive. And it is certainly not my intention tonight to make any child's eyes roll the wrong way.

“Now listen closely to everything I say,” I say in a very soft but not condescending tone, making sure the child's attention is held by my voice and by the gleaming pen on which his eyes are now focused. He is a good subject for a child, who usually have wandering eyes and minds. He agrees with me that he is feeling rather sleepy now, that bedtime is imminent. “And when you go back to your room, you will fall tight to sleep and have wonderful dreams. You will not awaken until morning, *no matter what sounds you hear outside your door*. Understand?” He nods; he is a great nodder, this one. “Very good. And for being such an agreeable subject, I'm going to make you a present of this beautiful pen of sterling silver, which you will keep with you always as a reminder that nothing is what it seems to be. Do you know what I'm talking about?” His head moves slowly and gently up and down with the chilling appearance of deep wisdom. “All right, then. But before you go back to your room, I want you to tell me if there's a back stairway by which I may leave.” His finger points down the hall and to the left. “Thank you, young man. Thank you very much. Now off to bed and to your wonderful dreams.” He disappears into the Piranesian darkness at the end of the hallway.

For a moment I stand staring down into that merry room below, where the laughing and the dancing have reached their zenith. My fickle somnambule herself seems to be caught up in the party's web, and has forgotten all about her master. She's left me on the sidelines, a many-tendriled,

mazy wallflower. But I'm not jealous; I can understand why they've taken you away from me. They simply can't help themselves, now can they? I told them how beautiful and perfect you were, and they can't resist you, my love.

Unfortunately they failed to appreciate the best part of you, preferring to lose themselves in the labyrinth of your grosser illusions. Didn't I show our well-behaved audience an angelized version of you? And you saw their reaction. They were bored and just sat in their seats like a bunch of stiffs. Of course, what can you expect? They wanted the death stuff, the pain stuff. All that flashy junk. They wanted cartwheels of agonized passion; somersaults into fires of doom; nosedives, if you will, into the frenzied pageant of vulnerable flesh. They wanted a tangible *thrill*.

And now that their own miniature pageant seems to have reached its peak, I think the time is right to awaken this mob from its hypnotic slumber and thrill the daylights out of them. It is time for the chime.

There is indeed a back stairway just where the boy indicated, one which leads me to a back hallway, back rooms, and finally a back door. And all these backways lead me to a vast yard where a garden is silhouetted beneath the moon and a small wood sways in the distance. A thick lawn pads my footsteps as I work my way around to the fine façade of this house.

I am standing on the front porch now, just behind its tall columns and beneath a lamp hanging at the end of a long brazen chain. I pause for a moment, savoring each voluptuous second. The serene constellations above wink knowingly. But not even these eyes are deep enough to outgaze me, to deceive the deceiver, illude the illusionist. To tell the

truth, I am a very bad mesmeric subject, unable to be drawn in by Hypnos' Heaven. For I know how easily one can be led past those shimmering gates, only to have a trap door spring open once you are inside. Then down you go! I would rather be the attendant loitering outside Mesmer's Maze than its deluded victim bumbling about within.

It is said that death is a great awakening, an emergence from the trance of life. Ha, I have to laugh. Death is the consummation of mortality and—to let out a big secret—only heightens mortal susceptibilities. Of course, it takes a great master to pry open a pair of post-mortem eyes once they are sewn tightly closed by Mr. D. And even afterward there is so little these creatures are good for. As conversationalists they are incredibly vacant; the things they tell you are no more than sweet nullities. But there is not much else you can do with them, they are so hideous and smell to high heaven. So mostly we just talk. Sometimes, however, I recruit them for my show, if I can manage to get their awkward forms out of the mausoleum, hospital, morgue, medical school, or funeral emporium I have deviously insinuated my way into. But there is one great problem: *You just can't make them beautiful*. One is not a sorcerer!

But perhaps one is a mental prestidigitator, an unusually adept whammy artist. One may make an audience think them beautiful, mistake them for spellbinding, snake-eyed charmers. One *can* do this at least, and loves to.

Even now I hear them still laughing, still dancing, still making a fuss over my charismatic doll of the dead. We showed them what you might be, O Seraphita, now let's show them what you really are. I have only to press this glowing little button of a doorbell to sound the chime which

will awaken them, to send the toll rolling throughout the house. Then they'll see. They'll see the sepulchral wounds: your eyes recessed in their sockets, sunken into mouths—those labyrinthine pits! They'll wake up and find their nice dancing clothes all clotted with putrescent goo. And wait'll they get a sniff of that stiff. They *will* be amazed.

One Thousand Painful Variations Performed Upon Divers Creatures Undergoing The Treatment of Dr. Moreau, Humanist (1994 The Agonizing Resurrection Of Victor Frankenstein Version)

First published in *Grimoire* #1, 1982

Dr. Moreau is examining the manwolf strapped to the operating table. He has worked very hard on this one, tearing him by slow and torturous degrees away from his bestial origins.

Today Dr. Moreau is curious. He sees the manwolf gazing at his pretty assistant. He first tries to read the truth in the manwolf's eyes but cannot. Now he must resort to an empirical test.

Very casually Dr. Moreau loosens the straps binding the wrists and ankles of the manwolf and then, quietly, leaves the room. He waits a few moments in the hallway, anxious to allow them enough time. Finally, opening a thin crack in the door, he peeks inside with one eye.

Well so much for that, he thinks, and suddenly steps into the room to confront his two subjects—the assistant; standing rigid with terror; the manwolf: down on one knee like a delirious knight before the manacled lady he would gladly save.

“Idiot,” screams Dr. Moreau, knocking the manwolf's head a good forty-five degrees to one side with the back of his hand. “We've got a long way to go with these beasts,” he tells his assistant. “It's for their own good!”

Then, with disgust, he takes a little gold key from his vest pocket and walks toward a huge door, behind which is a perplexing array of powerful drugs and instruments of unimaginable pain.

Ghost Stories For The Dead (1989 Crypt Of Cthulhu Version)

First published in *Grimoire* #2, 1982

> That faint light in each of use which dates back to before our birth, to before all births, is what must be protected if we want to rejoin that remote glory from which we shall never know why we were separated.
>
> —E. M. *Cioran*

The New Blackness

It isn't like that of an incessant night, the kind poked into only now and then by a few abandoned lights on a lonely street; nor is it like that of the drab trousers and matching jacket filled out by a stranger met on such a night. It isn't even what remains after a tricky wind snuffs the tiny hysteria of a match-flame which, on request, is offered by this stranger. Not like the stranger's face grinning in the flame-light; not like the sudden emptiness his weapon-weighted hand inflicts. The double negative night-within-night of the stranger's car trunk is not remotely like it.

It is absolutely, when all is considered, not anything like the dimness of the basement where the stranger detains his first victim, nor like the blindness with which he slowly and

with regrettable invention afflicts this victim. Not like it too is the gloom of an attic where a second victim, starving for days, feasts upon decomposing birds, which the stranger stealthily traps and laboriously defeathers before the eyes of his famished victim. Bound to a chair within the shuttered shed behind ruined apartments, a third victim ultimately discovers that twelve dense nights of radical, though very amateur, surgery does not even come close to it. And other victims, far too numerous to mention, experience various shades and types of lightlessness that are equally unlike the new blackness of their future.

For the new blackness keeps no secrets, and the new blackness touches without pain. In it there is nothing to know or remember about who you once might have been. Which of the strangers victims were you? Fortunately such troubling issues cannot raise themselves when there is no one left to care one way or another. Perhaps you were even that shabby madman himself, who saved his worst and most reliable torments to propel his own life into the mercies of the new blackness.

Is he there with you? You with him?

I am glad I cannot see your faces.

The New Silence

There is no preparation for it. Even the absence of an expected, a painfully desired, sound is an absence of infinitely grosser dimensions. The telephone—keeping stern vows, its coiled throat in knots—this supremely indifferent device and the sound it *doesn*'t make can merely hint at that higher absence. Of course such hints are restricted to certain peak phases of desolation suffered by certain imaginations, ones

without prayer of defense. Remember those rooms so stale, so dim that the dust seems to glitter with a final crackling luminescence precedent to ultimate gloom. Why doesn't that filthy thing ring! What lunatics people sometimes choose for their first *serious* fall into human affection. Ring, you infernal machine, unspeaking heart of hell.

Then it does. Remember its message: tonight in the park, by the far wall (the one with the stone heads on it that look like dragons), and make it late. So the tones of the tormentor finally get through, with only minor interference from a temperamental receiver. But tonight no spooks within the wire would interfere with their messages. However, the meeting begins strangely. Having apparently arrived first, he huddles in the ample shadows of the wall with the heads of stone. Only his voice seems to have kept the appointment, saying: closer, come closer. He will not comply with even the politest request to move out into the moonlight, no matter how frightened someone is, no matter how much someone needs to be reassured that it's really him crouching there. For by now anyone could tell that the voice is a fantastic imitation, and when the imposter does finally shake off the shadows and steps forth, someone is sorry for ever wanting her poorest secret wish granted. And now every sound seems the maddening drip of oceans of evil, blasphemy cooed near the ear of a blood sacrifice, a roaring sweat that ultimately evaporates into the sweet nothing of the new silence.

For in the new silence no voice deceives you, and in the new silence you cannot hear yourself weep. All voices are one in the new silence. You must know now what it was he

did to you and later to himself. You must now speak to each other in the language of the new silence.

So who was he? And who now are you?

I am so glad I cannot hear your answer.

The Old Nonsense and the New

How serious was the old nonsense? How terrible was it? How sad? These seem ridiculous questions now, but at the time never are. For at just the right moment they can seize the brain and squeeze it like something gone soft in the sun. And even when the sun is at its height, night may fall; even when golden light leans over a nice clean city. Indeed, from the lofty vantage of a forty-third floor everything looks especially polished—sterling streets, dazzling semiprecious sidewalks, windows locked diamond-wise into the other big buildings spreading out there for miles. What a promising place this is! Here everything is possible and nothing otherwise. No likelihood not leading to success, no unlikelihood linked to catastrophe, even for the newest comer loitering two score and three stories about Terra Incognitaville.

And though this hallway is long and quiet and empty, there is still no loneliness. There, look behind, a door is opening, the one leading to that supply room. Turn around, the man sneaking out of that room doesn't appear as if he has any business being up here. Then again, maybe he too is simply intent on staring out of the window and dreaming about the future. But he walks right past the window and, in passing, sends someone crashing through it with just one good shove of the shoulder. Forty-three floors is a long way to fall. And in those last screaming moments someone wonders how anyone could be duped by all this ludicrous glitter,

how anyone could bear confronting the face of a world that writhes in darkness without for a moment relaxing its blinding and inexcusable smile. How easily the old nonsense leads us on and, with neither warnings nor answers, delivers us into a nonsense that seems so different, so new.

For the new nonsense promises no punchlines or apologies, and the new nonsense peels itself back to reveal nothing within. No one is even left to know that nothing is there. How did you manage to take leave of that twinkling city without going anyplace? After you finished falling, where did you land?

Where are you now? Where did you go?

I am glad your responses do not make any sense in those dreams I have of you.

Tales of the New Dream

In the new dream the dead may not rest very long. Sometimes their rightful blackness is revoked, deserved silence foreclosed, their blissful sense of nothing cut off at closing time. And now these faithful patrons of annihilation, loyal customers of the abyss, these quiet tenants of paradise are thrown out on their ear like lowlife riffraff booted from a *respectable* establishment. Back down to earth, you wretches! Having no place else to spend eternity, they try to make the best, in other words *the worst*, of it.

Even now Mr. Benedict Griggs, founding member of the Congenial Gents, holds the attention of his fellow clubmen, including the Reverend Penny, with a hair-raising anecdote from his visit to America: how he wandered, quite without intention, into that slatternly district of a large New England city where the notorious “sad scientist” murders had oc-

curred; and how this drunkard, a somewhat lengthy knife in hand, weaved up to him to ask assistance and a few helpful directions home. Home, home. Help me home! was all the wobbling souse said. And upon noticing that this weaver and wobbler had, in fact, no eyes in his head, Mr. Griggs credited the specter with thereupon vanishing before his own. The entire episode merely "put quite a scare" into the rather fortunate Griggs. For others, depend on it, will have much more put into them!

Others may not be able to tell their friends, as just have Jamie Lempkovitch and his girl Lisa Ann Neff, that they were only *grabbed* by a pair of foul maniacs, one male and one female, who emerged from the sod in New Burnstow Park as if from the gentle surface of a pond. Others may have to leave behind more than their shoes and an old blanket when they make a getaway from these ravenous revenants, assuming anyone at all gets away next time the hideous couple appear. Others may not be as lucky!

And parallel to the small-town fame of the New Burnstow Park haunting are those metropolitan legends currently circulating anent an urban apparition that "flies into its victim's face," though only on the darkest downtown nights. And if this sky-diving shade finds a face it likes, in other words *hates*, it just may decide NOT TO FLY OUT AGAIN.

For in the new dream such beings—wrenched from eternity and returned to earth—are capable of anything from indiscretion to atrocity. Those who have suffered most know how to inflict it best—it's a law of the universe. The suicides, the murdered... the unfulfilled, the broken-hearted: veterans of extraordinary suffering and mercenaries of its perpetuation.

These are my mind's eyes, I who have no eyes. These are my mind's mind, I who am not mind. I am bereft of traits, bankrupt of qualities. The riches of the dead are extravagant next to my destitute estate. I have nothing but my immortality; and now, desiring or not, they will have it too.

And I am glad I cannot know them.

But I am even gladder they cannot know me.

The Frolic (2010 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

First published in *Fantasy Tales* #9, 1982

In a beautiful home in a beautiful part of town—the town of Nolgate, site of the state prison—Dr. Munck examined the evening newspaper while his young wife lounged on a sofa nearby, lazily flipping through the colorful parade of a fashion magazine. Their daughter Norleen was upstairs asleep, or perhaps she was illicitly enjoying an after-hours session with the new television she'd received on her birthday the week before. If so, her violation went undetected by her parents in the living room, where all was quiet. The neighborhood outside the house was quiet, too, as it was day and night. All of Nolgate was quiet, for it was not a place with much of a night life, save perhaps at the bar where the prison's correctional officers congregated. Such persistent quiet made the doctor's wife fidgety with her existence in a locale that seemed light-years from the nearest metropolis. But thus far Leslie did not complain of the lethargy of their lives. She knew her husband was quite dedicated to his new professional duties in this new place. Perhaps tonight, though, he would exhibit more of those symptoms of disenchantment with his work that she had been meticulously observing in him of late.

“How did it go today, David?” she asked, her radiant eyes peeking over the magazine cover, where another pair of eyes radiated a glossy gaze. “You were pretty quiet at dinner.”

“It went about the same,” said Dr. Munck without lowering the small-town newspaper to look at his wife.

“Does that mean you don't want to talk about it?”

He folded the newspaper backwards and his upper body appeared. “That's how it sounded, didn't it?”

“Yes, it certainly did. Are you okay?” Leslie asked, laying aside the magazine on the coffee table and offering her complete attention.

“Severely doubting, that's how I am.” He said this with a kind of far-off reflectiveness. Leslie now saw a chance to delve a little deeper.

“Anything particularly doubtful?”

“Only everything,” he answered.

“Shall I make us drinks?”

“That would be much appreciated.”

Leslie walked to another part of the living room and from a large cabinet pulled out some bottles and some glasses. From the kitchen she brought out a supply of ice cubes in a brown plastic bucket. The sounds of drink-making were the only intrusion upon the living room's plush quiet. The drapes were drawn on all windows except the one in the corner where an Aphrodite sculpture posed. Beyond that window was a deserted streetlighted street and a piece of moon above the opulent leafage of spring trees.

“Here you go. A little drinky for my hard-working darling,” she said, handing him a glass that was very thick at its base and tapered almost undetectably toward its rim.

“Thanks, I really needed one of these.”

“Why? Problems at the hospital?”

“I wish you'd stop calling it a hospital. It's a prison, as you well know.”

“Yes, of course.”

“You could say the word *prison* once in a while.”

“All right, then. How's things at the prison, dear? Boss on your case? Inmates acting up?” Leslie checked herself before things spiraled into an argument. She took a deep gulp from her drink and calmed herself. “I'm sorry about the snideness, David.”

“No, I deserved it. I'm projecting my anger onto you. I think you've known for some time what I can't bring myself to admit.”

“Which is?” Leslie prompted.

“Which is that maybe it was not the wisest decision to move here and take this saintly mission upon my psychologist's shoulders.”

Her husband's remark indicated an even more acute mood of demoralization than Leslie had hoped for. But somehow his words did not cheer her the way she thought they would. She could distantly hear the moving van pulling up to the house, but the sound was no longer as pleasing as it once was.

“You said you wanted to do something more than treat urban neuroses. Something more meaningful, more challenging.”

“What I wanted, masochistically, was a thankless job, an impossible one. And I got it.”

“Is it really that bad?” Leslie inquired, not quite believing she asked the question with such encouraging skepticism about the actual severity of the situation. She congratulated

herself for placing David's self-esteem above her own desire for a change of venue, important as she felt this was.

“I'm afraid it is that bad. When I first visited the prison's psychiatric unit and met the other doctors, I swore I wouldn't become as hopelessly cynical as they were. Things would be different with me. I overestimated myself by a wide margin, though. Today one of the orderlies was beaten up again by two of the prisoners, excuse me, ‘patients.’ Last week it was Dr. Valdman. That's why I was so edgy on Norleen's birthday. So far I've been lucky. All they do is spit at me. Well, they can all rot in that hellhole as far as I'm concerned.”

David felt his own words lingering atmospherically in the room, tainting the serenity of the house. Until then their home had been an insular haven beyond the contamination of the prison, an imposing structure outside the town limits. Now its psychic imposition transcended the limits of physical distance. Inner distance constricted, and David sensed the massive prison walls shadowing the cozy neighborhood outside.

“Do you know why I was late tonight?” he asked his wife.

“No, why?”

“Because I had an overlong chat with a fellow who hasn't got a name yet.”

“The one you told me about who won't tell anyone where he's from or what his real name is?”

“That's him. He's the standout example of the pernicious monstrosity of that place. A real beauty, that guy. One for the books. Absolute madness paired with a sharp cunning. Because of his cute little name game, he was classified as unsuitable for the general prison population and thus we in the

psychiatric section ended up with him. According to him, though, he has plenty of names, no less than a thousand, none of which he's condescended to speak in anyone's presence. It's hard to imagine that he has a name like everyone else. And we're stuck with him, no name and all."

"Do you call him that, 'no name'?"

"Maybe we should, but no, we don't."

"So what do you call him, then?"

"Well, he was convicted as John Doe, and since then everyone refers to him as that. They've yet to uncover any official documentation on him. It's as if he just dropped out of nowhere. His fingerprints don't match any record of previous convictions. He was picked up in a stolen car parked in front of an elementary school. An observant neighbor reported him as a suspicious character frequently seen in the area. Everyone was on the alert, I guess, after the first few disappearances from the school, and the police were watching him just as he was walking a new victim to his car. That's when they made the arrest. But his version of the story is a little different. He says he was fully aware of his pursuers and expected, even wanted, to be caught, convicted, and put in a penitentiary."

"Why?"

"Why? Who knows? When you ask a psychopath to explain himself, it only becomes more confusing. And John Doe is chaos itself."

"What do you mean?" asked Leslie. Her husband emitted a short burst of laughter and then fell silent, as if scouring his mind for the right words.

"Okay, here's a little scene from an interview I had with him today. I asked him if he knew why he was in prison."

“‘For frolicking,’ he said.

“‘What does that mean?’ I asked.

“His reply was: ‘Mean, mean, mean. You're a meany, that's what you are.’

“That childish ranting somehow sounded to me as if he were mimicking his victims. I'd really had enough right then but foolishly continued the interview.

“‘Do you know why you can't leave here?’ I calmly asked with a poor variant of my original inquiry.

“‘Who says I can't? I'll just go when I want to. But I don't want to go yet.’

“‘Why not?’ I naturally questioned.

“‘I just got here,’ he said. ‘Thought I'd take a holiday. Frolicking the way I do can be exhausting sometimes. I want to be in with all the others. Quite a rousing atmosphere, I expect. When can I go with them, when can I?’

“Can you believe that? It would be cruel, though, to put him in general population, not to say he doesn't deserve such cruelty. The average inmate doesn't look favorably on Doe's kind of crime. They see it as reflecting badly on them, being that they're just your garden variety armed robbers, murderers, and whatnot. Everyone needs to feel they're better than someone else. There's really no predicting what would happen if we put him in there and the others found out what he was convicted for.”

“So he has to stay in the psychiatric unit for the rest of his term?” asked Leslie.

“He doesn't think so. Being interred in a maximum security correctional facility is his idea of a holiday, remember? He thinks he can leave whenever he wants.”

“And can he?” asked Leslie with a firm absence of facetiousness in her voice. This had always been one of her weightiest fears about living in a prison town—that not far from their own backyard there was a horde of fiends plotting to escape through what she envisioned as rather papery walls. To raise a child in such surroundings was the prime objection she had to her husband's work.

“I told you before, Leslie, there have been very few successful escapes from that prison. If an inmate does get beyond the walls, his first impulse is always one of practical self-preservation. So he tries to get as far away as possible from this town, which is probably the safest place to be in the event of an escape. Anyway, most escapees are apprehended within hours after they've broken out.”

“What about a prisoner like John Doe? Does he have a sense of ‘practical self-preservation,’ or would he rather just hang around and do what he does somewhere that's conveniently located?”

“Prisoners like that don't escape in the normal course of things. They just bounce off the walls but not over them. You know what I mean?”

Leslie said she understood, but this did not in the least lessen the potency of her fears, which found their source in an imaginary prison in an imaginary town, one where anything could happen as long as it approached the hideous. Morbidity had never been her strong suit, and she loathed its intrusion on her character. And for all his ready reassurance about the able security of the prison, David also seemed to be profoundly uneasy. He was sitting very still now, holding his drink between his knees and appearing to listen for something.

“What's wrong, David?” asked Leslie.

“I thought I heard… a sound.”

“A sound like what?”

“Can't describe it exactly. A faraway noise.”

He stood up and looked around, as if to see whether the sound had left some tell-tale clue in the surrounding stillness of the house, perhaps a smeary sonic print somewhere.

“I'm going to check on Norleen,” he said, setting his glass down on the table beside his chair. He then walked across the living room, up the three segments of the stairway, and down the upstairs hall. Peeping into his daughter's room, he saw her tiny figure resting comfortably, a sleepy embrace wrapped about the form of a stuffed Bambi. She still occasionally slept with an inanimate companion, even though she was getting a little old for this. But her psychologist father was careful not to question her right to this childish comfort. Before leaving the room, Dr. Munck lowered the window which was partially open on that warm spring evening.

When he returned to the living room, he delivered the wonderfully routine message that Norleen was peacefully asleep. In a gesture containing faint overtones of celebratory relief, Leslie made them two fresh drinks, after which she said:

“David, you said you had an ‘overlong chat’ with that John Doe. Not that I'm morbidly curious or anything, but did you ever get him to reveal anything about himself? Anything at all?”

“Oh, sure,” Dr. Munck replied, rolling an ice cube around in his mouth. His voice was now more relaxed.

“You could say he told me everything about himself, but all of it was nonsense—the blathering of a maniac. I asked him in a casually interested sort of way where he was from.”

“‘No place,’ he replied like a psychotic simpleton.

“‘No place?’ I probed.

“‘Yes, precisely, Herr Doktor. I'm not some snob who puts on airs and pretends to emanate from some high-flown patch of geography. Ge-og-ra-phy. That's a funny word. I like all the languages you have.’

“‘Where were you born?’ I asked in another brilliant alternate form of the question.

“‘Which time do you mean, you meany?’ he said back to me, and so forth. I could go on with this dialogue—

“You do a pretty good John Doe imitation, I must say.

“Thank you, but I couldn't keep it up for very long. It wouldn't be easy to imitate all his different voices, accents, and degrees of articulacy. He may be something akin to a multiple personality, I'm not sure. I'd have to go over the tapes of my interviews with him to see if any patterns of coherency turn up, possibly something the detectives could use to establish who this guy really is. The tragic part is that knowing Doe's legal identity is a formality at this point, just tying up loose ends. His victims are dead, and they died horribly. That's all that counts now. Sure, he was somebody's baby boy at one time. But I can't pretend to care anymore about biographical details—the name on his birth certificate, where he grew up, what made him the way he is. I'm no aesthete of pathology. It's never been my ambition to study mental disease without effecting some improvement. So why should I waste my time trying to help someone like John Doe, who doesn't live in the same world as we do, psy-

chologically speaking. I used to believe in rehabilitation, not a purely punitive approach to criminal behavior. But those people, those *things* at the prison are only an ugly stain on our world. The hell with them. Just plow them all under for fertilizer, I say." Dr. Munck then drained his glass until the ice cubes rattled.

"Want another?" Leslie asked with a smooth therapeutic tone to her voice.

David smiled now, his illiberal outburst having purged him somewhat of his ire. "Let's get drunk and fool around, shall we?"

Leslie collected her husband's glass for a refill. Now there was reason to celebrate, she thought. David was not giving up his work from a sense of ineffectual failure but from anger, an anger that was melting into indifference. Now everything would be as it had been before; they could leave the prison town and move back home. In fact, they could move anywhere they liked, maybe take a long vacation first, treat Norleen to some sunny place. Leslie thought of all these things as she made two more drinks in the quiet of that beautiful room. This quiet was no longer an indication of soundless stagnancy but a delicious, lulling prelude to the promising days to come. The indistinct happiness of the future glowed inside her along with the alcohol; she was gravid with pleasant prophecies. Perhaps the time was now right to have another child, a little brother or sister for Norleen. But that could wait just a while longer... a lifetime of possibilities lay ahead. An amiable genie seemed to be on standby. They had only to make their wishes, and their bidding would be done.

Before returning with the drinks, Leslie went in the kitchen. She had something she wanted to give her husband, and this seemed the perfect time to do it. A little token to show David that though his job had proved a sad waste of his worthy effort, she had supported his work in her own way. With a drink in each hand, she held under her left elbow the small box she had got from the kitchen.

"What's that?" asked David, taking his drink.

"Just a little something for the art lover in you. I bought it at that little shop where they sell things the inmates at the prison make. Some of it is quality merchandise—belts, jewelry, ashtrays, you know."

"I know," said David, his voice at a distance from Leslie's enthusiasm. "I didn't think anyone actually bought that stuff."

"Well, I did. I thought it would help to support those prisoners who are doing something *creative*, instead of... well, instead of destructive things."

"Creativity isn't always an index of niceness, Leslie," David warned his wife.

"Wait'll you see it before passing judgment," she said, opening the flap of the box. "There—isn't that nice work?" She set the piece on the coffee table.

Dr. Munck now plunged into that depth of sobriety which can only be reached by falling from a prior alcoholic height. He looked at the object. Of course he had seen it before, watched it being tenderly molded and caressed by creative hands, until he sickened and could watch no more. It was the head of a young boy, a lovely piece discovered in gray formless clay and glazed in blue. The work radiated an extraordinary and intense beauty, the subject's face expressing

a kind of ecstatic serenity, the convoluted simplicity of a visionary's gaze.

“Well, what do you think of it?” asked Leslie.

David looked at his wife and said solemnly: “Please put it back in the box. And then get rid of it.”

“Get rid of it? Why?”

“Why? Because I know which of the inmates did this work. He was very proud of it, and I even forced a grudging compliment for the craftsmanship of the thing. But then he told me the source of his model. That expression of sky-blue peacefulness wasn't on the boy's face when they found him lying in a field about six months ago.”

“No, David,” said Leslie as a premature denial of what she was expecting her husband to reveal.

“This was his most recent—and according to him most memorable—‘frolic.’”

“Oh my God,” Leslie murmured softly, placing her right hand to her forehead. Then with both hands she gently placed the boy of blue back in his box. “I'll return it to the shop,” she said quietly.

“Do it soon, Leslie. I don't know how much longer we'll be residing at this address.”

In the moody silence that followed, Leslie briefly mused upon the now openly expressed departure from the town of Nolgate, their escape. Then she said: “David, did he actually talk about the things he did. I mean about—”

“I know what you mean. Yes, he did,” answered Dr. Munck with a professional gravity.

“Poor David,” Leslie said, lovingly sympathetic now that machinations were no longer required to achieve her ends.

“Actually, it wasn't that much of an ordeal, strange to say. The conversation we had could even be called stimulating in a clinical sense. He described his ‘frolicking’ in a highly imaginative manner that was rather engrossing. The strange beauty of this thing in the box here—disturbing as it is—somewhat parallels the language he used when talking about those poor kids. At times I couldn't help being fascinated, though maybe I was shielding my true feelings with a psychologist's detachment. Sometimes you just have to keep some distance from yourself and reality, even if it means becoming a little less human.

“Anyway, nothing he said was sickeningly graphic in the way you might imagine. When told me about his ‘most memorable frolic,’ it was with a powerful sense of wonder and nostalgia, shocking as that sounds to me now. He seemed to feel a kind of homesickness, though his ‘home’ is a ramshackle ruin of his decayed mind. His psychosis has evidently bred an atrocious fairyland which exists in a powerful way for him. And despite the demented grandeur of his thousand names, he actually sees himself as only a minor figure in this world—a mediocre courtier in a broken-down kingdom of miracles and horrors. This modesty is very interesting when you consider the egotistical magnificence that a lot of psychopaths would attribute to themselves given a limitless imaginary orbit where they could play any imaginary role. But not John Doe. He's a comparatively lazy demi-demon from a Neverland where dizzy chaos is the norm, a state of affairs on which he gluttonously thrives. Which is as good a description as any of the metaphysical economy of a psychotic's universe.

“There's actually quite a poetic geography to his interior dreamland as he describes it. He talked about a place that sounded like a cosmos of crooked houses and littered alleys, a slum among the stars. Which may be his distorted rendering of a life spent growing up in a shabby neighborhood—an attempt on his part to recast the traumatic memories of his childhood into a realm that cross-breeds a mean-street reality with a fantasy world of his imagination, a phantasmagoric mingling of heaven and hell. This is where he does his ‘frolicking’ with what he calls his ‘awestruck company.’ The place where he took his victims might possibly have been an abandoned building, or even an accommodating sewer. I say this based on his repeated mentioning of ‘the jolly river of refuse’ and ‘the jagged heaps in shadows,’ which could certainly be mad transmutations of a literal wasteland, some grubby and secluded environment that his mind turned into a funhouse of bizarre marvels. Less fathomable are his memories of a moonlit corridor where mirrors scream and laugh, dark peaks of some kind that won't remain still, a stairway that's ‘broken’ in a very strange way, though this last one fits in with the background of a dilapidated slum. There is always a paradoxical blend of forsaken topographies and shining sanctuaries in his mind, almost a self-hypnotic—” Dr. Munck caught himself before continuing in this vein of reluctant admiration.

“But despite all these dreamy back-drops in Doe's imagination, the mundane evidence of his frolics still points to crimes of a very familiar, down-to-earth type. Run-of-the-mill atrocities, if one can speak of the deeds he committed as such. Doe denies there was anything pedestrian about his mayhem. He says he just made the evidence look that way

for the dull masses, that what he really means by ‘frolicking’ is a type of activity quite different from, even opposed to, the crimes for which he was convicted. This term probably has some private associations rooted in his past.”

Dr. Munck paused and rattled around the ice cubes in his empty glass. Leslie seemed to have drifted into herself while he was speaking. She had lit a cigarette and was now leaning on the arm of the sofa with her legs up on its cushions, so that her knees pointed at her husband.

“You should really quit smoking someday,” he said.

Leslie lowered her eyes like a child mildly chastised. “I promise that as soon as we move—I'll quit. Is that a deal?”

“Deal,” said David. “And I have another proposal for you. First let me tell you that I've definitely decided to give notice of my resignation.”

“Isn't that a little soon,” asked Leslie, hoping it wasn't.

“Believe me, no one will be surprised. I don't think anyone will even care. Anyway, my proposal is that tomorrow we take Norleen and rent a place up north for a few days or so. We could go horseback riding. Remember how she loved it last summer? What do you say?”

“That sounds nice,” Leslie agreed with a ripple of enthusiasm. “Very nice, in fact.”

“And on the way back we can drop off Norleen at your parents’. She can stay there while we take care of the business of moving out of this house, maybe find an apartment temporarily. I don't think they'll mind having her for a week or so, do you?”

“No, of course not, they'll love it. But what's the great rush? Norleen's still in school, you know. Maybe we should wait till she gets out. It's just a month away.”

David sat in silence for a moment, apparently ordering his thoughts.

“What's wrong?” asked Leslie with just a slight quiver of anxiety in her voice.

“Nothing is actually wrong, nothing at all. But—”

“But what?”

“Well, it has to do with the prison. I know I sounded very smug in telling you how safe we are from that place, and I still maintain that we are. But this John Doe character I've told you about is very strange, as I'm sure you've gathered. He's positively a child-murdering psychopath... and then again. I really don't know what to say that would make any sense.”

Leslie quizzed her husband with her eyes. “I thought you said that inmates like him just bounce off the walls, not—”

“Yes, much of the time he's like that. But sometimes...”

“What are you trying to say, David?” asked Leslie, who was becoming infected by the uneasiness her husband was trying to hide.

“It's something that Doe said when I was talking with him today. Nothing really definite. But I'd feel infinitely more comfortable about the whole thing if Norleen stayed with your parents until we can organize ourselves.”

Leslie lit another cigarette. “Tell me what he said that bothers you so much,” she said firmly. “I should know, too.”

“When I tell you, you'll probably just think I'm a little crazy myself. You didn't talk to him, though, and I did. The mannerisms of his speech, or rather the many different mannerisms. The shifting expressions on that lean face. Much of the time I talked to him I had the feeling he was playing at some game that was beyond me, though I'm sure

it just seemed that way. This is a common tactic of the psychopath—messing with the doctor. It gives them a sense of power."

"Tell me what he said," Leslie insisted.

"All right, I'll tell you. I think it would be a mistake, though, to read too much into it. But toward the end of the interview today, when we were talking about those kids, he said something I didn't like at all. He enunciated his words in one of his affected accents, Scottish this time with a little German flavor thrown in. What he said, and I'm reciting it verbatim, was this: 'You wouldn't be havin' a misbehavin' laddie nor a little colleen of your own, now would you, Professor von Munck?' Then he grinned at me silently.

"Now I'm sure he was deliberately trying to upset me. Nothing more than that."

"But what he said, David: 'nor a little colleen.'"

"Grammatically, of course, it should have been 'or' not 'nor,' but I'm sure it wasn't anything except a case of bad grammar."

"You didn't mention anything about Norleen, did you?"

"Of course I didn't. That's not exactly the kind of thing I would talk about with these people."

"Then why did he say it like that?"

"I have no idea. He possesses a very weird sort of cleverness, speaking much of the time with vague suggestions and subtle jokes. He could have heard things abut me from someone on the staff, I suppose. Then again, it might be just an innocent coincidence." He looked to his wife for comment.

"You're probably right," Leslie agreed with an ambivalent eagerness to believe in this conclusion. "All the same, I think

I understand why you want Norleen to stay with my parents. Not that anything might happen—"

"Not at all. There's no reason to think anything would happen. No doubt this is a case of the doctor being out-psyched by his patient, but I don't really care anymore. Any reasonable person would be a little spooked after spending day after day in the pandemonium and often physical danger of that place. The murderers, the rapists, the dregs of the dregs. It's impossible to lead a normal family life while working under those conditions. You saw how I was on Norleen's birthday."

"I know. Not the best neighborhood in which to bring up a child."

David nodded slowly. "When I went to check on her a little while ago, I felt, I don't know, vulnerable in some way. She was hugging one of those stuffed security blankets of hers." He took a sip of his drink. "It was a new one, I noticed. Did you buy it when you were out shopping today?"

Leslie gazed blankly. "The only thing I bought was that," she said, pointing at the box on the coffee table. "What 'new one' do you mean?"

"The stuffed Bambi. Maybe she had it before and I just never noticed it," he said, partially dismissing the issue.

"Well, if she had it before, it didn't come from me," Leslie said quite resolutely.

"Nor me."

"I don't remember her having it when I put her to bed," said Leslie.

"Well, she had it when I looked in on her after hearing..."

David paused. From the expression on his face, he seemed to be contemplating a thousand thoughts at once, as if he

were engaged in some frantic, rummaging search within every cell of his brain.

“What's the matter, David?” Leslie asked, her voice weakening.

“I'm not sure exactly. It's as if I know something and don't know it at the same time.”

But Dr. Munck was beginning to know. With his left hand he covered the back of his neck, warming it. Was there a draft coming from another part of the house? Theirs was not the kind of place to be drafty, not a broken-down, hole-in-the-wall hovel where the wind gets in through ancient attic boards and warped window-frames. There actually was quite a wind blowing now; he could hear it hunting around outside and could see the restless trees through the window behind the Aphrodite sculpture. The goddess posed languidly with her flawless head leaning back, her blind eyes contemplating the ceiling and beyond. But beyond the ceiling? Beyond the hollow snoozing of the wind, cold and dead? And the draft?

What?

“David, do you feel a draft?” asked his wife.

“Yes,” he replied as if some sobering thought had just come to mind. “Yes,” he repeated as he rose out of his chair and walked across the living room, ever hurrying as he approached the stairway, leaped up its three segments, and ran down second-floor hall. “Norleen, Norleen,” he chanted before reaching the half-closed door of her room. He could feel the breeze coming from there.

He knew and did not know.

He groped for the light switch. It was low, the height of a child. He turned on the light. The child was gone. Across the

room the window was wide open, the white translucent curtains flapping upwards on the invading wind. Alone on the bed was the stuffed animal, torn, its soft entrails littering the mattress. Now stuffed inside, blooming out like a flower, was a crumpled piece of paper. And Dr. Munck could discern within the folds of that page a fragment of the prison's letterhead. But the note was not a typed message of official business: the handwriting varied from a neat italic script to a child's scrawl. He desperately stared at the words for what seemed a timeless interval without comprehending their message. Then, finally, the meaning of the note sank heavily in.

Dr. Monk, read the note from inside the animal, *We leave this behind in your capable hands, for in the black-foaming gutters and back alley of paradise, in the dank windowless gloom of some intergalactic cellar, in the hollow pearly whorls found in sewerlike seas, in starless cities of insanity, and in their slums... my awestruck little deer and I have gone frolicking. See you anon. Jonathan Doe.*

"David?" he heard his wife's voice inquire from the bottom of the stairs. "Is everything all right?"

Then the beautiful house was no longer quiet, for there rang a bright freezing scream of laughter, the perfect sound to accompany a passing anecdote of some obscure hell.

The Frolic (1989 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

First published in *Fantasy Tales* #9, 1982

In a beautiful home in a beautiful part of town—the town of Nolgate, site of the state prison—Dr. Munck examined the evening newspaper while his young wife lounged on a sofa nearby, lazily flipping through the colorful parade of a fashion magazine. Their daughter Norleen was upstairs asleep, or perhaps she was illicitly enjoying an after-hours session with the new color television she'd received on her birthday the week before. If so, her violation of the bedtime rule went undetected due to the affluent expanse between bedroom and living room, where her parents heard no sounds of disobedience. The house was quiet. The neighborhood and the rest of the town were also quiet in various ways, all of them slightly distracting to the doctor's wife. But so far Leslie had only dared complain of the town's social lethargy in the most joking fashion (“Another exciting evening at the Munck's monastic hideaway”). She knew her husband was quite dedicated to this new position of his in this new place. Perhaps tonight, though, he would exhibit some encouraging symptoms of disenchantment with his work.

“How did it go today, David?” she asked, her radiant eyes peeking over the magazine cover, where another pair of eyes radiated a glossy gaze. “You were pretty quiet at dinner.”

“It went about the same,” said David, without lowering the small-town newspaper to look at his wife.

“Does that mean you don't want to talk about it?”

He folded the newspaper backwards and his upper body appeared. “That's how it sounded, didn't it?”

“Yes, it certainly did. Are you okay today?” she asked, laying aside the magazine on the coffee table and offering her complete attention.

“Severely doubting, that's how I am.” He said this with a kind of far-off reflectiveness.

“Anything particularly doubtful, Dr. Munck?”

“Only everything,” he answered.

“Shall I make us drinks?”

“That would be much appreciated.”

Leslie walked to another part of the living room and from a large cabinet pulled out some bottles and some glasses. From the kitchen she brought out a supply of ice cubes in a brown plastic bucket. The sounds of drink-making were unusually audible in the living room's plush quiet. The drapes were drawn on all windows except the one in the corner where an Aphrodite sculpture posed. Beyond that window was a deserted street-lighted street and a piece of moon above the opulent leafage of spring trees.

“There you go, doctor,” she said, handing him a glass that was very thick at its base and tapered almost undetectably towards its rim.

“Thanks, I really need one of these.”

“Why? Aren't things going well with your work?”

“You mean my work at the prison?”

“Yes, of course.”

“You could say *at the prison* once in a while. Not always talk in the abstract. Overtly recognize my chosen professional environment, my—”

“All right, all right. How's things at the wonderful prison, dear? Is that better?” She paused and took a deep gulp from her glass, then calmed a little. “I'm sorry about the snideness, David.”

“No, I deserved it. I'm blaming you for long realizing something I can't bring myself to admit.”

“Which is?” she prompted.

“Which is that maybe it was not the wisest decision to move here and take this saintly mission upon my psychologist's shoulders.”

This remark was an indication of even deeper disenchantment than Leslie had hoped for. But somehow these words did not cheer her the way she thought they would. She could distantly hear the moving vans pulling up to the house, but the sound was no longer as pleasing as it once was.

“You said you wanted to do something more than treat urban neuroses. Something more meaningful, more challenging.”

“What I wanted, masochistically, was a thankless job, an impossible one. And I got it.”

“Is it really that bad?” Leslie inquired, not quite believing she asked the question with such encouraging skepticism about the actual severity of the situation. She congratulated herself for placing David's self-esteem above her own desire for a change of venue, important as she felt this was.

“I'm afraid it is that bad. When I first visited the prison's psychiatric section and met the other doctors, I swore I

wouldn't become as hopeless and cruelly cynical as they were. Things would be different with me. I overestimated myself by a wide margin, though. Today one of the orderlies was beaten up again by two of the prisoners, excuse me, 'patients'. Last week it was Dr. Valdman, that's why I was so moody on Norleen's birthday. So far I've been lucky. All they do is spit on me. Well, they can all rot in that hellhole as far as I'm concerned."

David felt his own words lingering atmospherically in the room, tainting the serenity of the house. Until then their home had been an insular haven beyond the contamination of the prison, an imposing structure outside the town limits. Now its psychic imposition transcended the limits of physical distance. Inner distance constricted, and David sensed the massive prison walls shadowing the cozy neighborhood outside.

"Do you know why I was late tonight?" he asked his wife.

"No, why?"

"Because I had an overlong chat with a fellow who hasn't got a name yet."

"The one you told me about who won't tell anyone where he's from or what his real name is?"

"That's him. He's just an example of the pernicious monstrosity of the place. Worse than a beast, a rabid animal. Demented blind aggression... and clever. Because of this cute name game of his, he was classified as unsuitable for the regular prison population and thus we in the psychiatric section ended up with him. According to him, though, he has plenty of names, no less than a thousand, none of which he's condescended to speak in anyone's presence. From my point of

view, he doesn't really have use for any human name. But we're stuck with him, no name and all."

"Do you call him that, 'no name'?"

"Maybe we should, but no, we don't."

"So what do you call him, then?"

"Well, he was convicted as John Doe, and since then everyone refers to him by that name. They've yet to uncover any official documentation on him. Neither his fingerprints nor photograph correspond to any record of precious convictions. I understand he was picked up in a stolen car parked in front of an elementary school. An observant neighbor reported him as a suspicious character frequently seen in the area. Everyone was on the alert, I guess, after the first few disappearances from the school, and the police were watching him just as he was walking a new victim to his car. That's when they made the arrest. But his version of the story is a little different. He says he was fully aware of his pursuers and expected, even wanted, to be caught, convicted, and exiled to the penitentiary."

"Why?"

"Why? Why ask why? Why ask a psychotic to explain his own motivation, it only becomes more confusing. And John Doe is even less scrutable than most."

"What do you mean?"

"I can tell you by narrating a little scene from the interview I had with him today. I asked him if he knew why he was in prison.

"'For frolicking,' he said.

"'What does that mean?' I asked.

"His reply was: 'Mean, mean, mean. You're a meany.'

“That childish ranting somehow sounded to me as if he were mimicking his victims. I'd really had enough right then but foolishly continued the interview.

“‘Do you know why you can't leave here?’ I calmly asked with a poor variant of my original inquiry.

“‘Who says I can't? I'll just go when I want to. But I don't want to yet.’

“‘Why not?’ I naturally questioned.

“‘I just got here,’ he said. ‘Thought I'd take a rest after frolicking so hard. But I want to be in with all the others. Unquestionably stimulating atmosphere. When can I go with them, when can I?’

“Can you believe that? It would be cruel, though, to put him in the regular prison population, not to say he doesn't deserve this cruelty. The average inmate despises Doe's kind of crime, and there's really no predicting what would happen if we put him in there and the others found out what he was convicted for.”

“So he has to stay in the psychiatric section for the rest of his term?” asked Leslie.

“He doesn't think so. He thinks he can leave whenever he wants.”

“And can he?” questioned Leslie with a firm absence of facetiousness in her voice. This had always been one of her weightiest fears about living in this prison town, that every moment of the day and night there were horrible fiends plotting to escape through what she envisioned as rather papery walls. To raise a child in such surroundings was another of her objections to her husband's work.

“I told you before, Leslie, there have been very few successful escapes from that prison. If an inmate does get bey-

ond the walls, his first impulse is usually one of practical self-preservation, and he tries to get as far away as possible from this town, which is probably the safest place to be in the event of an escape. Anyway, most escapees are apprehended within hours after they've gotten out."

"What about a prisoner like John Doe? Does he have this sense of 'practical self-preservation,' or would he rather just hang around and do damage to someone?"

"Prisoners like that don't escape in the normal course of things. They just bounce off the walls but not over them. You know what I mean?"

Leslie said she understood, but this did not in the least lessen the potency of her fears, which found their source in an imaginary prison in an imaginary town, one where anything could happen as long as it approached the hideous. Morbidity had never been among her strong points, and she loathed its intrusion of her character. And for all this ready reassurance about the able security of the prison, David also seemed profoundly uneasy. He was sitting very still now, holding his drink between his knees and appearing to listen for something.

"What's wrong, David?" asked Leslie.

"I thought I heard... a sound."

"A sound like what?"

"Can't describe it exactly. A faraway noise."

He stood up and looked around, as if to see whether the sound had left some tell-tale clue in the surrounding stillness of the house, perhaps a smeary sonic print somewhere.

"I'm going to check on Norleen," he said, setting his glass down rather abruptly on the table beside his chair and splashing the drink around. He walked across the living

room, down the front hallway, up the three segments of the stairway, and then down the upstairs hall. Peeking into his daughter's room he saw her tiny figure resting comfortable, a sleepy embrace wrapped about the form of a stuffed Bambi. She still occasionally slept with an inanimate companion, even though she was getting a little old for this. But her psychologist father was careful not to question her right to childish comfort. Before leaving the room Dr. Munck lowered the window which was partially open on that warm spring evening.

When he returned to the living room he delivered the wonderfully routine message that Norleen was peacefully asleep. In a gesture containing faint overtones of celebratory relief, Leslie made them two fresh drinks, after which she said:

"David, you said you had an 'overlong chat' with that John Doe. Not that I'm morbidly curious or anything, but did you ever get him to reveal very much about himself?"

"Sure," Dr. Munck replied, rolling an ice cube around in his mouth. His voice was now more relaxed.

"He told me everything about himself, and on the surface all of it was nonsense. I asked him in a casually interested sort of way where he was from.

"'No place,' he replied like a psychotic simpleton.

"'No place?' I probed.

"'Yes, precisely there, Herr Doktor.'

"'Where were you born?' I asked in another brilliant alternate form of the question.

"Which time do you mean, you meany?' he said back to me, and so forth. I could go on with this dialogue—"

"You do a pretty good John Doe imitation, I must say."

“Thank you, but I couldn't keep it up for very long. It wouldn't be easy to imitate all his different voices and levels of articulateness. He may be something akin to a multiple personality, I'm not sure. I'd have to go over the tape of the interview to see if any patterns of coherency turn up, possibly something the detectives would use to establish the man's identity, if he has one left. The tragic part is that this is all, of course, totally useless information as far as the victims of Doe's crimes are concerned... and as far as I'm concerned it really is too. I'm no aesthete of pathology. It's never been my ambition to study disease merely for its own sake, without effecting some kind of improvement, trying to help someone who would just as soon see me dead, or worse. I used to believe in rehabilitation, maybe with too much naiveté and idealism. But those people, those *things* at the prison are only an ugly stain on existence. The hell with them,” he concluded, draining his glass until the ice cubes rattled.

“Want another?” Leslie asked with a smooth therapeutic tone to her voice.

David smiled now, the previous outburst having purged him somewhat. “Let's get drunk, shall we?”

Leslie collected his glass for a refill. Now there was reason to celebrate, she thought. Her husband was not giving up his work from a sense of ineffectual failure but from anger. The anger would turn into resignation, the resignation into indifference, and then everything would be as it had been before; they could leave the prison town and move back home. In fact, they would move anywhere they liked, maybe take a long vacation first, treat Norleen to some sunny place. Leslie thought of all this as she made the drinks in the quiet of that beautiful room. This quiet was no longer

an indication of soundless stagnancy but a delicious lulling prelude to the promising days to come. The indistinct happiness of the future glowed inside her along with the alcohol; she was gravid with pleasant prophecies. Perhaps the time was now right to have another child, a little brother for Norleen. But that could wait just a while longer... a lifetime of possibilities lay ahead, awaiting her wishes like a distinguished and fatherly genie.

Before returning with the drinks, Leslie went into the kitchen. She had something she wanted to give her husband, and this was the perfect time to do it. A little token to show David that although his job had proved a sad waste of his worthy efforts, she had nevertheless supported his work in her own way. With a drink in each hand, she held under her left elbow the small box she had got from the kitchen.

"What's that?" asked David, taking his drink.

"Something for you, art lover. I bought it at that little shop where they sell things the inmates at the penitentiary make—belts, jewelry, ashtrays, you know."

"I know," David said with an unusual lack of enthusiasm. "I didn't think anyone actually bought that stuff."

"I, for one, did. I thought it would help to support those prisoners who are doing something *creative*, instead of... well, instead of destructive things."

"Creativity isn't always an index of niceness, Leslie," David admonished.

"Wait'll you see it before passing judgment," she said, opening the flap of the box. "There—isn't that nice work?" She set the piece on the coffee table.

Dr. Munck now plunged into that depth of sobriety which can only be reached by falling from a prior alcoholic height.

He looked at the object. Of course he had seen it before, watched it being tenderly molded and caressed by creative hands, until he sickened and could watch no more. It was the head of a young boy, discovered in gray formless clay and glossily glazed in blue. The work radiated an extraordinary and intense beauty, the subject's face expressing a kind of ecstatic serenity, the labyrinthine simplicity of a visionary's gaze.

"Well, what do you think of it?" asked Leslie.

David looked at his wife and said solemnly: "Please put it back in the box. And then get rid of it."

"Get rid of it? Why?"

"Why? Because I know which of the inmates did this work. He was very proud of it, and I even forced a grudging compliment for the craftsmanship of the thing. It's obviously remarkable. But then he told me who the boy was. That expression of sky-blue peacefulness wasn't on the boy's face when they found him lying in a field about six months ago."

"No, David," said Leslie as a premature denial of what she was expecting her husband to reveal.

"This was his last, and according to him most memorable, 'frolic'."

"Oh my God," Leslie murmured softly, placing her right hand to her cheek. Then with both hands she gently placed the boy of blue back in his box. "I'll return it to the shop," she said quietly.

"Do it soon, Leslie. I don't know how much longer we'll be residing at this address."

In the moody silence that followed, Leslie briefly contemplated the new openly expressed, and definite reality of their

departure from the town of Nolgate, their escape. Then she said: “David, did he actually talk about the things he did. I mean about—”

“I know what you mean. Yes, he did,” answered Dr. Munck with a professional seriousness.

“Poor David,” Leslie sympathized.

“Actually, it wasn't that much of an ordeal. The conversation we had could even be called stimulating in a clinical sort of way. He described his ‘frolicking’ in a kind of unreal and highly imaginative manner that wasn't always hideous to listen to. The strange beauty of this thing in the box here—disturbing as it is—somewhat parallels the language he used when talking about those poor kids. At times I couldn't help being fascinated, though maybe I was shielding my feelings with a psychologist's detachment. Sometimes you just have to distance yourself, even if it means becoming a little less human.

“Anyway, nothing that he said was sickeningly graphic in the way you might imagine. When he told me about his last and ‘most memorable frolic,’ it was with a powerful sense of wonder and nostalgia, shocking as that sounds to me now. It seemed to be a kind of homesickness, though his ‘home’ is a ramshackle ruin of his decaying mind. His psychosis had bred this blasphemous fairyland which exists in a powerful way for him, and despite the demented grandeur of his thousand names, he actually sees himself as only a minor figure in this world—a mediocre courtier in a broken-down kingdom of horror. This is really interesting when you consider the egoistical magnificence that a lot of psychopaths would attribute to themselves given a limitless imaginary realm in which they could play any imaginary role. But not John Doe.

He's a comparatively lazy demi-demon from a place, a No Place, where dizzy chaos is the norm, a state of affairs on which he gluttonously thrives. Which is as good a description as any of the metaphysical economy of a psychotic's universe.

"There's actually quite a poetic geography to his interior dreamland as he describes it. He talked about a place that sounded like the back alleys of some cosmic slum, an inner-dimensional dead end. Which might be an indication of a ghetto upbringing in Doe's past. And if so, his insanity has transformed these ghetto memories into a realm that cross-breeds a banal streetcorner reality with a psychopath's paradise. This is where he does his 'frolicking', with what he calls his 'awe-struck company,' the place possibly being an abandoned building, or even an accommodating sewer. I say this based on his repeated mentioning of 'the jolly river of refuse' and 'the jagged heaps in shadows,' which are certainly mad transmutations of a literal wasteland. Less fathomable are his memories of a moonlit corridor where mirrors scream and laugh, dark peaks of some kind that won't remain still, a stairway that's 'broken' in a very strange way, though this last one fits with the background of a dilapidated slum.

"But despite all these dreamy backdrops in Doe's imagination, the mundane evidence of his frolics still points to a crime of very familiar, down-to-earth horrors. A run-of-the-mill atrocity. Consistently enough, Doe says he made the evidence look that way as a deliberate afterthought, that what he really means by 'frolicking' is a type of activity quite different from, even opposed to, the crime for which he was

convicted. This term probably has some private associations rooted in his past."

Dr. Munck paused and rattled around the ice cubes in his empty glass. Leslie seemed to have drifted into herself while he was speaking. She had lit a cigarette and was now leaning on the arm of the sofa with her legs up on its cushions, so that her knees pointed at her husband.

"You should really quit smoking someday," he said.

Leslie lowered her eyes like a child mildly chastised. "I promise that as soon as we move—I'll quit. Is that a deal?"

"Deal," said David. "And I have another proposal for you. First let me tell you that I've definitely decided to hand my resignation no later than tomorrow morning."

"Isn't that a little soon?" asked Leslie, hoping it wasn't.

"Believe me, no one will be surprised. I don't think anyone will even care. Anyway, my proposal is that tomorrow we take Norleen and rent a place up north for a few days or so. We could go horseback riding. Remember she loved it last summer? What do you say?"

"That sounds nice," Leslie agreed with a deep glow of enthusiasm. "Very nice, in fact."

"And on the way back we can drop off Norleen at your parents'. She can stay there while we take care of the business of moving out of this house, maybe find an apartment temporarily. I don't think they'll mind having her for a week or so, do you?"

"No, of course not, they'll love it. But what's the great rush? Norleen's still in school, you know. Maybe we should wait till she gets out. It's just a month away."

David sat in silence for a moment, apparently ordering his thoughts.

“What's wrong?” asked Leslie with just a slight quiver of anxiety in her voice.

“Nothing is actually wrong, nothing at all. But—”

“But what?”

“Well, it has to do with the prison. I know I sounded very smug in telling you how safe we are from prison escapes, and I still maintain that we are. But the one prisoner I've told you about is also very strange, as I'm sure you've gathered. He is positively criminally psychotic... and then again he's something else.”

Leslie quizzed her husband with her eyes. “I thought you said he just bounces off walls, not—”

“Yes, much of the time he's like that. But sometimes, well...”

“What are you trying to say, David?” asked an uneasy Leslie.

“It's something that Doe said when I was talking with him today. Nothing really definite. But I'd feel infinitely more comfortable about the whole thing if Norleen stayed with your parents until we can organize ourselves.”

Leslie lit another cigarette. “Tell me what he said that bothers you so much,” she said firmly. “I should know too.”

“When I tell you, you'll probably just think I'm a little crazy myself. You didn't talk to him, though, and I did. The tone, or rather the many different tones of his voice; the shifting expressions on that lean face. Much of the time I talked to him I had the feeling he was beyond me in some way, I don't know exactly how. I'm it was just the customary behavior of the psychopath—trying to shock the doctor. It gives them a sense of power.”

“Tell me what he said,” Leslie insisted.

“All right, I'll tell you. As I said, it's probably nothing. But toward the end of the interview today, when we were talking about those kids, and actually kids in general, he said something I didn't like at all. He said it with an affected accent, Scottish this time with a little German flavor thrown in. He said: ‘You wouldn't be havin’ a misbehavin’ laddie nor a little colleen of your own, now would you, Professor von Muck?’ Then he grinned at me silently.

“Now, I'm sure he was deliberately trying to upset me without, however, having any purpose in mind other than that.”

“But what he said, David: ‘nor a little colleen.’”

“Grammatically, of course, it should have been ‘or’ not ‘nor’, but I'm sure it wasn't anything except a case of bad grammar.”

“You didn't mention anything about Norleen, did you?”

“Of course I didn't. That's not the kind of thing I would talk about with these... people.”

“Then why did he say it like that?”

“I have no idea. He possesses a very weird sort of cleverness, speaking much of the time with vague suggestions, even subtle jokes. He could have heard things about me from someone on the staff, I suppose. Then again, it might be just an innocent coincidence.” He looked to this wife for comment.

“You're probably right,” Leslie agreed with an ambivalent eagerness to believe in this conclusion. “All the same, I think I understand why you want Norleen to stay with my parents. Not that anything might happen—”

“Not at all. There's no reason to think anything would happen. Maybe this is a case of the doctor being out-psyched

by his patient, but I don't really care anymore. Any reasonable person would be a little spooked after spending day after day in the chaos and physical danger of that place... the murderers, the rapists, the dregs of the dregs. It's impossible to lead a normal family life while working under those conditions. You saw how I was on Norleen's birthday."

"I know. Not the best surroundings in which to bring up a child."

David nodded slowly. "When I think of how she looked when I went to check on her a little while ago, hugging one of those stuffed security blankets of hers." He took a sip of his drink. "It was a new one, I noticed. Did you buy it when you were out shopping today?"

Leslie gazed blankly. "The only thing I bought was that," she said, pointing at the box on the coffee table. "What 'new one' do you mean?"

"The stuffed Bambi. Maybe she had it before and I just never noticed it," he said, partially dismissing the issue.

"Well, if she had it before, it didn't come from me," Leslie said quite resolutely.

"Nor me."

"I don't remember her having it when I put her to bed," said Leslie.

"Well, she had it when I looked in on her after hearing..."

David paused with a look on his face of intense thought, an indication of some frantic rummaging search within.

"What's the matter, David?" Leslie asked, her voice weakening.

"I'm not sure exactly. It's as if I know something and don't know it at the same time."

But Dr. Munck was beginning to know. With his left hand he covered the back of his neck, warming it. Was there a draft coming from somewhere, another part of the house? This was not the kind of house to be drafty, not a broken-down place where the win gets in through ancient attic boards and warped window-frames. There actually was quite a wind blowing now, he could hear it hunting around outside and could see the restless trees through the window behind the Aphrodite sculpture. The goddess posed languidly with her flawless head leaning back, her eyes contemplating the ceiling and beyond. But beyond the ceiling? Beyond the hollow snoozing of the wind, cold and dead? And the draft?

What?

"David, do you feel a draft?" asked his wife.

"Yes," he replied very loudly and with unusual force.

"Yes," he repeated, rising out of the chair, walking across the room, his steps quickening toward the stairs, up the three segments, then running down the second-floor hallway. "Norleen, Norleen," he chanted before reaching the half-closed door of her room. He could feel the breeze coming from there.

He knew and did not know.

He groped for the light switch. It was low, the height of a child. He turned on the light. The child was gone. Across the room the window was wide open, the white translucent curtains flapping upwards on the invading wind. Alone on the bed was the stuffed animal, torn, its soft entrails littering the mattress. Now stuffed inside, blooming out like a flower, was a piece of paper, and Dr. Munck could discern within its

folds a fragment of the prison's letterhead. But the note was not a typed message of official business: the handwriting varied from a neat italic script to a child's scrawl. He desperately stared at the words for what seemed an infinite interval without comprehending their message. Then, finally, the meaning sank heavily in.

Dr. Monk, read the note from inside the animal, *We leave this behind in your capable hands, for in the black-foaming gutters and back alleys of paradise, in the dank windowless gloom of some galactic cellar, in the hollow pearly whorls found in sewer-like seas, in starless cities of insanity, and in their slums... my awe-struck little deer and I have gone frolicking. See you anon. Jonathan Doe.*

"David?" he heard his wife's voice inquire from the bottom of the stairs. "Is everything all right?"

Then the beautiful house was no longer quiet, for there rang a bright freezing scream of laughter, the perfect sound to accompany a passing anecdote from some obscure hell.

The Premature Transfiguration (2011 Noctuary Version)

First published in *Grimoire* #2, 1982, as 'Excerpt From Dreams Of The Zodiac' under the pseudonym Louis Miguel Riaz

Another party, this time very remote: a sprawling old house at a forest's edge, moon-stabbing pines in the background. Everyone was *very* ill-looking, the worst I've seen, but elegant somehow. The wax-faced women wore long gowns with long sleeves ending in satin gloves; stockings covered what little I could see of their legs; and what hair they had left was used to veil, with pathetic sparseness, the jaundiced flesh of their foreheads, jaws, and cheekbones. Elaborate eye makeup helped them enormously. The men resorted to dark glasses and large hats with ample and somewhat floppy brims. At least *most* of the men so equipped themselves (this time!), and the ones who didn't I deeply wish had. All were holding champagne glasses with galaxies of bubbles sparkling from their stems to their brims. But of course even such dainty glassware seemed to burden those thin and hard-to-control hands. Frequent spills were to be expected, though as always they did their best to keep this to a minimum. I witnessed two such mishaps which soaked the front of their poor victims' expensive evening clothes, and I'm sure there were many more. Fortunately the champagne was a colorless liquid (the doctor showing great considerate-

ness in this detail), and only left a wet patch which dried up soon afterward.

I decided to wear dark glasses for once, but my full head of well-groomed hair still made me stand out in the crowd. The doctor spotted me almost immediately and guided us into a quiet corner.

“You could have also worn a hat, you know,” he scolded.

“*You* never wear either a hat or glasses,” I replied. “And I've always meant to ask why you keep that thick beard of yours. It must be a source of despair for every man in this room, myself excepted.”

“I'm their doctor. Though they may occasionally despise me for it, in their hearts they're glad I'm not as they are. How do you like this party?”

For some reason I didn't bother with the usual lies. “You can't really expect me to be enthusiastic,” I said, but the doctor pretended not to hear. My suspicion is that he actually takes a host's pride in his handling of these terminal affairs. For all I know, he may even relish his proximity with the horrible. On the contrary, my own interest in these gatherings can only be attributed to the remuneration I receive for my services to the doctor and his patients. Were it not for me, I cringe to think what would happen. Timing is everything when it comes to preventing pain and preserving dignity. Nevertheless, I'm ready to do whatever is required, just as long as the job is done.

“You're a little early tonight, aren't you?” he asked, glancing at his watch.

“You want me to leave?”

“No, not at all. It's just that, well, you can see how nervous they're getting now that you're here. I think they

thought there would be more time. You could show a little feeling anyway."

"And what if I did?" I said in a tense whisper. "Do you really believe that would help matters?"

He knew it wouldn't and said nothing in reply.

"You want me to get lost for a little while?" I said, my hand discreetly hooding the words. The doctor nodded gravely. "I think I'll just wander around the upstairs of this opulent big house. Give a shout when you want me to start."

He scratched his beard audibly. And I took my leave.

Upstairs much longer than ever before. Lights didn't work. Sat in a trapezoid of moonlight for many silent moments. Began to get worried and came downstairs before getting the doctor's go-ahead.

It was quiet, much too. The doctor squatted on the landing of the staircase, his face buried in his hands. He was half sobbing to himself, saying: "Wrong, wrong, all wrong."

"What happened?" I asked. "Where is everybody?"

"They all ran out the back door," he said, pointing. "They must be down by the lake by now."

"No problem," I said consolingly. "I'll just finish things there."

He stared at me straight in the face, and I didn't like the look in his old surgeon's eyes.

"You don't understand."

"What do you mean?" I asked without having to.

"They still have much of their brains left," he answered, also without having to. But I did not expect him to add: "And mouths, too. Mouths that can speak to you."

There was, of course, every reason for my not hesitating another second, for not thinking about it at all. I proceeded

quickly, though not wildly, toward the door at the back of the house; but by the time it slammed itself behind me, I was running as fast as I could down to the lake in the pines. The moon overhead was full and bright and beautiful.

I followed the voices which mingled with the sounds of the wind. When I reached the lake, I saw them all scrambling along the shore. But some of them had already begun that kind of dancing which is so dreadful to watch. None of them was larger than a dinner plate and their multiple radiating legs (with pincers by now) made them look like unholy pinwheels spinning in the moonlight. *Very* dreadful. And the doctor was right; they still had much of their brains left. Too much... they *knew* what was happening to them. Not like the other times. And they did have their mouths, yes indeed, right in the middle of their brittle pink bodies. When my presence became generally known, they began scuttling around my feet.

“Kill us, kill us,” they chanted in their many tiny voices. “Kill us before we change any more. Some of us are dancing ones. Some of us have gone into the lake forever. Kill us, please, kill us.”

“That's what I'm here for,” I said, but only to myself.

I picked up a few heavy rocks and went to work. I think I got most of them, too. Later, when I returned to the house, I told the doctor I had got them all. He didn't challenge me on it. Needed to believe me, poor man. Also, he promised to take precautions to ensure that this kind of thing would never happen again. Gave me a bonus that seemed to make it all worthwhile.

The Physic
(1994 Noctuary Version)

First published in *Grimoire* #2, 1982, as 'Excerpt From Dreams Of The Zodiac' under the pseudonym Louis Miguel Riaz

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“I'm their doctor. Though they may occasionally despise me for it, in their hearts they're glad I'm not as they are. How do you like this party?”

For some reason I didn't bother with the usual lies. “You can't really expect me to be enthusiastic,” I said, but the doctor pretended not to hear. Odd as it may seem, I think he actually has a host's pride in his handling of these sad affairs. While my own composure can only be attributed to a morose need of the good doctor's money, he himself appears to be genuinely at ease with the horrible.

“You're a little early tonight, aren't you?” he asked, glancing at his watch.

“You want me to leave?”

“No, not at all. It's just that, well, you can see how nervous they're getting now that you're here. I think they thought there would be more time. You could show a little feeling anyway.”

“And what if I did,” I said in a tense whisper. “Do you really believe that would help matters?”

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He scratched his beard audibly, which I took as my signal to take my leave.

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“Kill us, kill us,” they chanted in their many tiny voices. “Kill us before we change more. Some of us are dancing ones. Some of us have gone into the lake forever. Kill us, please, kill us.”

“That's what I'm here for,” I said, but only to myself.

I picked up a few heavy rocks and went to work. I think I got most of them, too. Later, when I returned to the house, I told the doctor I had got them all. He didn't challenge me on it. Needed to believe me, poor man. Also, he promised to take precautions to insure that this kind of thing would never happen again. Gave me a bonus that seemed to make it all worthwhile.

Sardonic Mundane (1982 Grimoire Version)

First published in *Grimoire* #2, 1982 under the pseudonym 'Charles Miguel Riaz'

The marvelous... is an imposition, concluded the gentleman seated over by the window, his head buried in a newspaper. Imagine the night sky turning out to be the skin of a cobra all along, only with its usual evenly distributed glistening concentrated into an infinite number of discrete and widely-spaced points. Who cares! What really affects a person are things like that loudmouthed infant disturbing the atmosphere of an otherwise tolerable restaurant.

Not exceptional, just tolerable, he concluded. His second conclusion that day, but it was still only lunchtime.

"I'm sorry, sir," the waiter replied to the gentleman's order. "All we have left today is two-head soup. But it's our specialty."

"A baby crying so noisily that I can hardly read my newspaper, and I've waited all this time simply for the pleasure of being told that all I can eat in this place is *thin* soup. You'll have to do better than that. I could go across the street, you know."

The waiter bowed graciously and removed himself, returning a few moments later.

"Sir, I'm pleased to inform you that today we have an excellent *three*-head soup."

“So! I sit here reading the same paragraph over and over without understanding a word of it because some little whelp is yammering in the background and now my sole consolation is to consume a sickeningly *thick* soup which would probably give me a blood condition, if I didn't already have one.”

The waiter bowed even more graciously than the first time and, once again, removed himself. The gentleman re-buried his head in his newspaper, looking up only when the expressionless waiter returned with a tray bearing a big steaming bowl. (A few packages of crackers were already on the table.) “Well, at least that brat has shut himself up,” said the gentleman, heartily picking up a large spoon from the table. “I suppose I'll just have to take my chances with the soup. Can't have everything in this life; I know that.”

“Especially prepared for you, sir,” said the waiter as he set down the bowl before the gentleman's eyes: “Two *and a half*-head soup.”

“Oh, my God!” gasped the would-be gourmet (his words not so much spoken as exhaled) when he looked down into the bowl, his hand growing white around the enormous spoon. And everyone in the restaurant was now gazing at the seated paralytic, an intense but in no way ostentatious hatred in their eyes. Finally the waiter inclined his face toward the gentleman's.

“You ordered it, you eat it,” he whispered through a perfect set of teeth.

—*Louis Miguel Riaz*

(originally appeared in journal L'amour fou (Brussels), #14)

An Interview With Louis Miguel Riaz (1982 Grimoire Version)

This “interview” appeared in Grimoire #2 Fall 1982. Ligotti converses with his alias, Louis Miguel Riaz. The introduction to the issue says *our interview this issue is with exiled surrealist Louis Miguel Riaz, who certain governmental agencies would also like to catch.*
First published in *Grimoire* #2, 1982.

GRIMOIRE: Could you please explain the term “automatic horror” and how this process works.

RIAZ: I can easily explain the term itself, which simply denotes the consequences of “automatic writing” when applied to the utmost limit. If a writer allows the deepest stratum of his consciousness to do the talking, the transcript of oratory will always be one that is appalling, in varying ways and degrees, to the upper levels.

GRIMOIRE: But how automatic is automatic horror? Yours seem every bit as structured as, if you'll pardon the expression, *manual* narratives. Consciously controlled, that is.

RIAZ: You're assuming there's no structure to be found in the abyss of the individual mind and perhaps not even in the fundament of being itself. That the universe is founded upon an indifferent chaos has traditionally been a soothing conception. The infinite armies of atoms are blameless because they *care not what they do*. They're not responsible for their own nightmare by virtue of the universal disarray. But so does a bed of crystals seem to be a disarray, until you observe

the rigid inner design. And in automatic horror the design observed can be a very dismaying one, at least to those sensitive enough to catch on. Of course not all instances of automatic writing yield such horrific treasures, meaning that the practitioner's brain did not touch absolute bottom. Then again, there may be more involved than merely searching the depths of an *individual* consciousness. Automatic horror could be a breaking through to some supra-zone linked to all matter and sensation. But this intrudes upon the totally unknown and its establishable validity, in my opinion, is ultimate zero. Theoretically, of course, this concept is crawling with possibilities.

GRIMOIRE: Perhaps you could elaborate on some of them for us.

RIAZ: I really don't think I should have to. The idea that if a brain with a penchant for literary composition can penetrate to the fount of its own awareness, it will inevitably produce horror texts is certainly not new with my writing. Others have already repeatedly exploited this principle in their own works, that ultimate knowledge is ultimate horror, that to understand all is to dread all, etcetera.

GRIMOIRE: Are you saying that automatic horror is just another backdrop to literary creation?

RIAZ: From a certain viewpoint—not my own—yes, that's all I'm saying. My own viewpoint claims much more. You have to understand that for years I've lived and breathed what you've termed a “backdrop to literary creation.” If my outlook is a somewhat dogmatic one, it has not been arrived at hastily or without laborious examination. All the mocking services of my skepticism have been placed at my imagination's disposal. At grave personal risk, I might add.

GRIMOIRE : Your experiments in automatic horror.

RIAZ: Yes. There is, of course, much more involved than sitting at a desk where a blank sheet of paper and a steaming cup of coffee have been placed in convenient proximity. In fact, this is hardly ever the case. More often I'm undergoing or have just emerged from some critical turbulence of the psyche, not to say it doesn't reach beyond this handy psychological focus. And this, I'd like to point out, is only superficially related to those *simulated* states of mental turmoil used by the surrealists of old for their production line automatic *writings*. I've never simulated anything.

GRIMOIRE: Is it true that you deliberately incited a group of roughnecks in a bar to threaten your life in order to write "Thou Strike Me Dead"?

RIAZ: Of course it isn't true. I religiously avoid *instigating* conflicts both within and outside of myself. I equally avoid avoiding them. If some instance of internal or external derangement arises, I merely do my best to let it take its course and lead me where it will. But the difficult, the impossible thing is to follow it all the way without at some point having your involuntary protective mechanisms force you to turn back. Even the most minor crisis cannot be allowed full flow, because even the least trickle of chaos will lead you back to that infinite ocean of horrors which is the source of all being. For instance, a moment of panic deriving from some precarious episode on the highway, if you could only keep from blocking out its implications, would pulverize your every atom right down to the dead cells of your toenails.

GRIMOIRE: And if you could withstand such an onslaught of information and then express it in language...

RIAZ: Yes, you could write the words that would drive the reader mad, the truly forbidden book. This is only a mythical beast of horror fiction, though. No writer could ever approach this achievement, except perhaps by sheer accident, that is *automatically*. This cataclysmic act would have to be unthinking in the extreme, like jumping off a high building, *just to see what it felt like*, and only remembering on the way down that you would die and never have the leisure to contemplate your experience. It would be self-assassination of the most thorough kind. You would literally destroy whatever cohesive stuff it is that enables you to sustain whatever illusions your existence is based upon. The worst always happens, or seems to, automatically, by accident. Who would ever desire such a thing?

GRIMOIRE: It's been said that you did in your narrative about the New Orleans bordello which by force of voodoo managed to impress an old-fashioned angel into the services of the house. The concluding passage where the protagonist imagines he's eating the angelified flesh...

RIAZ: Are there many other questions? I'm rather tired.

GRIMOIRE: Just a few more, if you would be so kind. It might seem like a lot to ask, but could you give a brief definition of horror.

RIAZ: I don't think a definition is so much needed as a history, an excavation into horror's origins. This is a monumental undertaking and right now I could only sketch out the first few pages of such a chronicle. Should I bother?

GRIMOIRE : Please do, by all means.

RIAZ: All right, then. First, horror did not always exist and is probably not universal among all the varieties of sentient life. Though the horror experienced by certain types of

vegetable and animal life under certain conditions may be an unending source of speculation, I can only speak with authority for my own kind. We can imagine that the first experience of horror was bestowed upon a humanal prototype just below the line of Australopithecus. This creature might have been swimming across a narrow width of river to reach his primitive social unit, vaguely musing on the meal and mate waiting for him on the other side. But suddenly the fulfillment of his diffuse but intense longings is threatened, as they have been countless times in the past. This time the threat takes the form of a fishy predator with a man-sized mouth which is wide open and heading straight for our hungry/lonely pre-human. But this time a new dimension of feeling emerges from the crisis of physical survival. Og, or whatever his name may be, swims as fast as he can toward safety, but as he thrashes through the murky water it becomes clear to him, in a way it never was before, just what is happening, and for the first time he is consciously, brilliantly aware of what may happen if he doesn't reach shore before The Beast reaches his hysterically paddling feet. He will be reduced to a morsel, the kind he unthinkingly shoves into his own mouth every day of his life. Post-morselization, he will never see others of his kind again, and they will never see him. But the formula for true horror is not complete until Og asks himself that utterly unnecessary and unanswerable question: How could a thing like this happen? Even when Og is safely on the river bank and panting from his ordeal, this question continues to haunt him. Afterward the whole world looks different, very strange. And The Beast, which previously was confined to the world of water, now lives everywhere—in flowers, in shadows, even in dead

things. It lives in the moon and sweeps down every night to invade Og's dreams. It lives in the very air Og breathes. At first no one else understands what Og's problem is. But it is only a matter of time before everyone begins seeing The Beast, whether it's really there or not, and Horror has been delivered into the world. Do you get the general idea?

GRIMOIRE: Yes, it seems clear enough. One last question. Are you still writing horror and will you continue to do so?

RIAZ: Briefly, yes I am. But whether or not I will continue to produce horror texts is not really up to me. I will as long as my inspiration is going strong. Frankly, though, I look forward to the day when it peters out, when I've exhausted every horrific theme latent within my brain. Let someone else write the work that drives everyone mad. I'll just sit and stare out the window and watch the seasons pass. After all, perhaps the only true happiness, the only true glory, lies midway between absolute horror and absolute boredom: dreaming at your ease, waiting for a coffee and dessert to be served to you in a pleasant restaurant with a good view of the twilight...

GRIMOIRE : Thank you, Mr. Riaz.

RIAZ: My pleasure.

Paradoxes From Hell (1988 AKLO: A Volume of the Fantastic Version)

First published in *Grimoire #4*, 1983 under the pseudonym 'Charles Miguel Riaz'

The Decayed Mystic

Perhaps on some star-forsaken night a decayed mystic first posed this question: did the Divine willingly enter into the bargain of being, and for what gain? Taking into consideration that It screams by way of every mouth generated in this world, the agreement must have been based on some very harsh terms. So harsh, in fact, that a bottom line of bliss has become inconceivable to the decayed mystic, who has brooded all along in good faith.

And now he dreams of another Deity, one that is horrified to have taken *such* form, one racked with aches of strangeness at how Its *deal* has turned out. But even though every living particle strives for a certain condition, which may be termed a "state of pain," it could still remain that the Divine has bargained well. For there had to be an even more dreadful condition which the contract of suffering escaped, something *worse* than pain.

Consequently the decayed mystic has received a new lease on life and is revived by agony. For, as happens to even the lowliest creatures, he has a new mission: dreaming of that more excruciating condition prior to, perhaps posterior to,

the lesser evil of being, and gives thanks to the Divine for the succours of a moderate misery, the haven of a relative Hell.

He also begins gearing himself up for the twisted task of having to re-baptize all the old torments with names of joy.

But let us not listen to such language.

The Stricken Philosopher

It must have been some stricken philosopher who realized our will is free—but only to suffer, to throb at a second's notice. Nothing other than pure pain could prove our freedom, since alternatives are non-existent. Hence, this poison is lapped up quite willingly by a beast that knows no other nourishment. Whether the decision is made in the garden or the torture chamber, the choice is clear: suffer or be damned! The proofs are a matter of record.

But our blind alley of torment proves much more about the world at large than ourselves. How could we be free for one thing and the rest of creation for another? The truth is that it isn't. Pain is normal throughout all living, and perhaps non-living, particles: it is the status quo without threat of subversion. All is in harmony with it, everything plays the tune. Flowers shrieking on a summer's day, wolves wailing in their lair of ice, worms mute with underground panic—all the keys and stops function perfectly, melodies of agonies are backed by chords of excruciation. While children whine in hospitals of gingerbread, the other voices in the worldly menagerie sing their parts... in the field and sky, in swamp and jungle, under seas and on mountaintops. The mysterious music flows.

And who could will against it? Whose volition is sufficient to oppose the supremely normal order? Supposing this possible, wouldn't such a creature cease to enjoy the security of anguish, the safety of a *well-established* world of pain? This vile being would illegally reap the damnations of a stone's peace, the paralysis of the wind's contentment, and would escape from the barbs of nature only to enter into a supernatural Hell: a place where mutually exclusive conditions of life and numbness coexist in impossibility. Only the gods can go there, and this actor of the will would become a god—a god on a slab, a god bound to the wheel, a god wrapped tight in red-hot chains.

But the wisdom of the eons counsel all against the miseries of the escapee of pain. Everyone is forewarned and knows enough to avoid such a doom. Everyone except the stricken philosopher, who must fulfill his destiny of convulsions in the horrible contentment of a supernatural ruin. And only from an uncanny dungeon can his soprano be howled into the chorus of nature, only from the shadows of the unreal can his voice join the screams of the natural world, which to him sound like a laughter or the sighs of peace.

Must we leave him there? Of course.

The Deranged Poet

Was it not some deranged poet who began to eat truth as one partakes of a strange and perhaps deadly food? Little nibbles to start off, tiny nips which cause the tongue to tingle, a weird but not yet unpleasant sensation. He continues munching, full-grown mouthfuls now. But already the meal is overwhelming in its oddity, an experience that is unreal yet hellishly tangible. Unfortunately the deranged poet

has also learned that he must keep eating away if he doesn't want to end up a permanent resident of one of those intolerably eerie dreams his feast has induced. He wanders from dream to dream, hoping to find a way out of this maze of psychic indigestion he has found within.

But how does he know he is eating truth and not something else? He knows by the way each swallow feels as it goes down, by the way everything inside opens up a little wider, a little deeper each time, until there will be enough room to devour the universe and himself along with it. And he knows by the pain, which he cannot stop feeding if he doesn't want to *die hungry*.

Finally his hunger for truth, for pain—the same thing by now— leads him to a paradise for the insatiable, the domain of the great deceiver. In Hell, the deranged poet feeds on all the lies in sight, for these are the only things powerful enough to incite pain which is the truth. In hopeless anguish, the deranged poet decides to give up eating altogether, allow the pain to abate, and suffer the consequences.

The consequences are a beatific satiation he has never known, a supernatural glut of salvation beyond his most abandoned hopes. Unhappily, it lasts for no more than a few seconds before he is hungry again.

But of this new hunger it is best not to speak.

The Complete Madman

It could have been none other than a complete madman who just assumed that to be is to be in pain. He did not take into consideration those lapses from greater to lesser pains, those fluctuations which prevent the damned from getting a solid grip on their torment. The incomplete pain, the relat-

ive pain—obstacles to an ideal Hell in which pure anguish may be enjoyed *to its fullest*, without the diluting intermediaries of an alleviation. Anything else is utter torture!

Having suffered the storms along pain's crooked margins, the complete madman prays to be delivered straight into the eye of pain. Here, all reposes in the equilibrium of abandoned hope, the quietude of screams undisturbed by smiles, the even agony of perdition never to be exacerbated or relieved by the confusions of paradise. To dwell no longer in the anxious shadow of pain, but to step right up and merge with its mystical body—this is the dream! And if it were any other...

But unspeakable complications intervene. The complete madman is tempted by the deceptions of bliss, who says: "Come unto me, for without my blessings you will never know misery in all its truth." "Lies," counters the complete madman with all his lung power. He knows he is getting side-tracked by impure excitations, that his guarantee of a perfect Hell has been undermined by the fine print of ease, that his black cacophony has been violated by the melodic illuminations, that nourishing substances have been tucked into his poison. "No!" he protests. "I must not succumb to these false pains, this *mortal* flaying. I would submit only to an eternal session in the pit of a thousand books!"

But the complete madman will never attain his salvation, for his conscience is not clear. He believes it to be a pair of white wings for sailing into the blackness, though it is merely a muddied cloak which weighs him down with fear, indecision, and all the compunctions of happiness. Never in good faith can he commit himself to ruin and thereby be saved. Never can he say with a pure heart: "Oh, most divine

Hell, deliver us from that absolute joy which we have no hope of knowing."

One day the complete madman becomes piercingly aware of his predicament and, in his despair, achieves a glorifying glimpse of his goal. But the vision quickly disperses and afterward he is even worse off than before.

What happens still later to the complete madman is not for our eyes.

Postscript

The decayed mystic, the stricken philosopher, the deranged poet, and the complete madman once met to talk things over and check on each other's progress. A written record of their meeting is buried in the deepest archives of hell.

Dr. Voke and Mr. Veech (2010 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

First published in *Grimoire* #5, 1983

There is a stairway. It climbs crooked up the side of total darkness. Yet its outlines are visible, like a scribble of lightning engraved upon a black sky. And though standing unsupported, it does not fall. Nor does it end its jagged ascent until it has reached the obscure loft where Voke, the recluse, has cloistered himself.

Someone named Veech is now mounting the stairway, which seems to trouble him somehow. Though the angular scaffolding as a whole seems secure enough, Veech appears hesitant to place his full weight on the individual steps. A victim of vague misgivings, he ascends in weird mincing movements. Every so often he looks back over his shoulder at the stairs he has just placed his weight upon, for they feel to him more like soft clay than solid material and perhaps he is expecting to see the imprints of his soles on their surface. But the stairs are unchanged.

Veech is wearing a long, brightly colored coat, and the splinters on the railing of the stairway sometimes snag his bulky sleeves. They also snag his bony hands, but Veech is more exasperated by the destruction of expensive cloth than injuries to his undear flesh. While climbing, he sucks at a small puncture in his forefinger to keep from staining his

coat with blood. At the seventeenth stair above the seventeenth, and last, landing—Veech trips. The long tails of the coat become tangled between his legs and there is a ripping sound as he falls. At the end of his patience, Veech removes the coat and flings it over the side of the stairway into the black abyss. Shabby clothes hang loosely upon his thin body.

At the top of the stairs there is only a single door. With widely splayed fingers, Veech pushes it open. Behind the door is Voke's loft, which appears to be a cross between a playroom and a place of torture.

The darkness and silence of the great room are somewhat compromised by noisy jets of blue-green light flickering spasmodically along the walls. But for the most part the room lies buried in shadows. Even its exact height is uncertain, since above the convulsive illumination almost nothing can be seen by even the sharpest pair of eyes, never mind Veech's squinting little slits. Some of the lower beams of the crisscrossing rafters are visible, but the ceiling is entirely obscured, if in fact Voke's sanctum has been provided with one.

Somewhere above the gritty floor, more than a few life-size dolls hang suspended by wires which glisten like wetted strands of a spider web. But none of the dolls is seen in whole. The long-beaked profile of one juts into the light; the shiny satin legs of another find their way out of the upper dimness; a beautifully pale hand glows in the distance; while much closer the better part of a harlequin dangles into view, cut off at the neck by blackness. Indeed, much of the inventory of this vast room appears only as parts and pieces of objects which manage to push their way out of the smothering dark. Upon the floor, a long low box thrusts partway into the scene, showing off its reinforced edges of bright metal strips

plugged with heavy bolts. Pointed and strangely shaped instruments bloom out of the loam of shadows. They are crusted with age. A great wheel appears at quarter-phase in the room's dimness. Other sections, appendages, and gear-works of curious machines also complicate this immense gallery.

As Veech progresses through the half-light, he is suddenly halted by a metal arm with a soft black handle. He backs off and continues to walk about the chamber, grinding sawdust, sand, perhaps pulverized stars underfoot. The dismembered limbs of dolls and puppets are strewn about everywhere. Posters, signs, billboards, and leaflets of various sorts are scattered around like playing cards, their bright words disarranged into nonsense. Countless other objects, devices, and leftover goods stock the room, more than one could possibly take notice of. But they are all, in some way, like those which have been described. One wonders, then, how they could add up to such an atmosphere of... isn't *repose* the word? Yes, but a certain kind of repose: the repose of ruin.

“Hello,” Veech calls out. “Doctor, are you here?”

Within the darkness ahead there suddenly appears a tall rectangle, like a ticket-seller's booth at a carnival. The lower part is composed of wood and the upper part of glass. Its interior is lit up by an oily red glare. Slumped forward on its seat inside the booth, as if asleep, is a well-dressed dummy: nicely fitting black jacket and vest with bright silver buttons, a white high-collar shirt with silver cufflinks, and a billowing cravat which displays a pattern of moons and stars. Because his head is forwardly inclined, the dummy's only feature of note is the black sheen of its painted hair.

Veech approaches the booth a little cautiously. He seems to be most interested in the figure within. Through a semi-circular opening in the glass, Veech slides his hand into the booth, apparently with the intention of giving the dummy's arm a shake. But before his own arm creeps very far toward its goal, several things occur in succession: the dummy casually lifts its head and opens its eyes… it reaches out and places its wooden hand on Veech's hand of flesh… and its jaw drops open to dispense a mechanical laugh—yah-ha-ha-ha-ha, yah-ha-ha-ha-ha.

Wresting his hand away from the dummy, Veech staggers backward a few steps. The dummy continues to give forth its mocking laughter, which flaps its way into every niche of the loft and flies back as peculiar echoes. The dummy's face is vacant and handsome; its eyes roll like mad marbles. Then, from out of the shadows behind the dummy's booth, steps someone who is every bit as thin as Veech, though much taller. His outfit is not unlike the dummy's, but his clothes hang on him, and what there is left of his sparse hair falls like torn rags across his bone-white scalp.

"Did you ever wonder, Mr. Veech," Voke begins, parading slowly toward his guest while holding one side of his coat like the train of a gown. "I say, did you ever wonder what it is that makes the animation of a wooden dummy so terrible to see, not to mention to hear? Listen to it, I mean really listen. Ya-ha-ha-ha-ha: a series of sounds that becomes excruciatingly eloquent when uttered by the Ticket Man. They are a species of poetry that sings what should not be sung, that speaks what should not be spoken. But what in the world is it laughing about. Nothing, it would seem. No clear motives or impulses make the dummy laugh, and yet it does!

"'But what is this laughter for?' you might well ponder. It seems to be for your ears alone, doesn't it? It seems to be directed at every part of your being. It seems... knowing. And it is knowing, but in another way from what you suppose, in another direction entirely. It is not you the dummy knows—it is only itself. The question is not: 'What is the laughter for,' not at all. The question is: 'Where does it come from?' This in fact is what inspires your apprehension. While the dummy does terrorize you, his terror is actually greater than yours.

"Think of it: *wood waking up*. I can't put it any clearer than that. And let's not forget about the painted hair and lips, the glassy eyes. These, too, are aroused from a sleep that should never have been broken; these, too, are now part of a tingling network of dummy-nerves, alive and aware in a way we cannot begin to imagine. This is something too painful for tears and so the dummy laughs in your face, trying to give vent to a horror that was no part of his old home of wood and paint and glass. But this horror is the very essence of its new home—our world, Mr. Veech. This is what is so terrible about the laughing Ticket Man. Go to sleep now, dummy. There, he has gone back to his lifeless slumber. Be glad I didn't make one that screams, Mr. Veech. And be gladder still that the dummy, after all, is just a device. Am I getting through to you, Mr. Veech?"

"Yes," says Veech, who seems not to have heard a word of Voke's monologue.

"Well, to what do I owe your presence here today? It is day, isn't it, or very close to it?"

"It is," Veech replies.

“Good, I like to keep abreast of things. What's your latest?” Voke inquires while sauntering slowly about the clutter of his loft.

Veech leans back against a vague mound of indefinable objects and stares at the floor. He sounds drowsy. “I wouldn't have come here, but I didn't know what else to do. How can I tell you? The past days and nights, especially the nights, like icy hells. I suppose I should say that there is someone—”

“Whom you have taken a liking to,” Voke finishes.

“Yes, but then there is someone else—”

“Who is somehow an obstacle, someone who has made your nights so frosty. This seems very straightforward. Tell me, what is her name, the first someone?”

“Prena,” answers Veech after some hesitation.

“And his, the second.”

“Lamm. But why do you need their names to help me?”

“Their names, like your name, and mine for that matter, are of no actual importance. I was just maintaining a polite interest in your predicament, nothing more. As for helping you, that assumes I have some mastery over this situation.”

“But I thought,” stammers Veech, “the loft, your devices, you seem to have a certain… knowledge.”

“Like the dummy's knowledge? You shouldn't have depended on it. Now you just have one more disappointment to contend with. One more pain. But listen, can't you just stick it out? In time you will forget all about this Prena. Why become involved in that madness. It's something to consider.”

“I can't help myself, doctor,” says Veech in a plaintive voice.

“I understand, but first hear me out. I hate to see you like this, Mr. Veech. Believe me, I know whereof I speak. I was

not always as you see me. But you know what they say: *Body and soul are both undone when two by two they become as one*. Or perhaps I made that up. My memory is blissfully bad. In any event, let me give you one final nugget of advice: forsake the world and cling to the shadows."

"I am my own shadow," Veech replies.

"Yes, I can see that. Then all I can say at this point is that you've been warned. So let us speak hypothetically for a moment. Are you familiar with the Street of Wavering Peaks? I know it has a more common name, but I like to call it that because of all those tall, slanting houses."

Veech nods to indicate that he, too, knows the street.

"Well—and I promise nothing, remember, I make no pledges or vows—but if you can somehow manage to bring both of your friends through that street tonight, I think there might be a solution to your problem, if you really want one. Do you mind what form the solution takes?"

"I just want your help, doctor. I'm in your hands."

"You really are serious, aren't you?"

Veech says nothing in reply. Voke shrugs and gradually fades back to his point of origin within the deepest shadows of the room. The red light in the booth of the Ticket Man also fades like a setting sun, until the only color left in the room is the ultramarine of the flames burning on the walls. Veech folds his hands and gazes into the upper reaches of the loft, as if he can already see the slender rooftops hovering over the Street of Wavering Peaks.

—

By night, the façades of each edifice on either side of this narrow street seem to be fused together, as if they are bon-

ded by shadows to one another. Aside from their foundations and a few floors with shuttered windows, they are all roof. Splendidly they rise into the night, often reaching fantastic altitudes. At angles they sway a little against the sky, undulating at their pinnacles like tall trees in a gentle wind.

Tonight the sky is a swamp of murky clouds glowing in the false fire of the moon. From the direction of the street's arched entranceway, three approaching figures are preceded by three elongated shadows. One walks ahead, leading the way but lacking the proper gestures of knowledge and authority. Behind are the shapes of a man and a woman, side by side with only a slice of evening's soft radiance between them.

Toward the end of the street, the leading figure stops and the other two catch up with him. They are now all three standing outside the loftiest of the street's peaked buildings. This one appears to serve as a place of business, since there is a sign hanging above its door. Muddled by shadows, it swings ever so slightly in the wind, squeaking softly. On either of its sides there is a painted picture of the goods or services sold there: a pair of tongs, or something similar, laying crosswise upon what is perhaps a poker, or some other lengthy implement. But the business is closed for the night and the shutters are secured. A round attic window high above seems to be no more than an empty socket, though from ground level—where the three figures have assumed the tentative postures of somnambulists—it is difficult to tell exactly what things are like up there. And now a fog begins to cut off their gaze from the upper regions of the Street of Wavering Peaks.

Veech looks vaguely distressed, apparently unsure just how much longer they should loiter in this place. Not being privy to what is supposed to occur, if anything, what action should he take? All he can do at the moment is stall. But soon enough everything is brought to a swift conclusion.

One moment Veech is drowsily conversing with his two companions, both of them looking sternly suspicious at this point; the next moment it is as if they are two puppets who have been whisked upwards on invisible strings, into the fog and out of sight. It all happens so suddenly that they do not make a sound, though a little later there are faint, hollow screams from high above. Veech has fallen to his knees and is covering his face with both his hands.

Two went up, but only one comes down—a single form suspended an arm's length above the stone-paved street and twisting a bit, as if at the end of a hangman's rope. Veech uncovers his eyes and looks at the thing. Yes, there is only one, but this one has too many… there is too much of everything on this body. Two faces sharing a single head, two mouths that have fallen silent forever with parted lips. The thing continues to dangle in the air even after Veech has completely collapsed on the Street of Wavering Peaks.

—

Voke's next meeting with Veech is as unexpected as the last. There is a disturbance in the loft, and the recluse lugs his bones out of the shadows to investigate. What he sees is Veech and the Ticket Man both screaming with laughter. Their cachinnations stir up the stagnant air of the loft. They are two maniac twins crying and cackling with a single voice.

“What's going on here, Mr. Veech?” demands Voke.

Veech ignores him and continues his riotous duet with the dummy. Even after Voke touches the booth and says “Go to sleep, dummy,” Veech still giggles all by himself, as if he, too, is an automaton without command over his own actions. Voke knocks Veech to the floor, which seems to hit the right mechanism to shut off his voice. At least he is quiet for a few moments. Then he looks up and scowls at Voke.

“Why did you have to do that to them?” he asks with a deeply stricken reproachfulness. His voice is rough from all that laughter. It sounds like grating machinery.

“I'm not going to pretend I don't know what you're talking about. I have heard about what happened, not that I should care. But you can't hold me responsible, Mr. Veech. I never leave my loft, you know that. However, you're perfectly free to go, if you go now. Haven't you caused me enough trouble!”

“Why did it have to happen like that?” Veech protests.

“How should I know? You said you didn't mind what form the solution to your problem took. Besides, I think it all worked out for the best. Those two were making a fool of you, Mr. Veech. They wanted each other and now they have each other. Two by two they have become as one, while you are free to move on to your next disaster. Wait one moment, I know what's bothering you,” says Voke with sudden enlightenment. “You're distressed because it all ended up with *their* demise and not yours. Death is always the best thing, Mr. Veech, but who would have thought you could appreciate such a view? I've underestimated you, no doubt about it. My apologies.”

“No,” screams Veech, shivering like a sick animal. Voke now becomes excited.

“No? Noooo? What is the matter with you? Why do you set me up for these disappointments? I've had quite enough without your adding to the heap. Take a lesson from the Ticket Man here. Do you see him whining? No, he is silent, he is still. A dummy's silence is the most soothing silence of all, and his stillness is the perfect stillness of the unborn. He could be making a fuss, but he isn't. And it is precisely his lack of action, his unfulfilled nature that makes him the ideal companion, my only true friend it seems. Dead-wood, I adore you. Look at how his hands rest upon his lap in empty prayer. Look at the noble bearing of his collapsed and powerless limbs. Look at his numb lips muttering nothing, and look at those eyes—how they gaze on and on forever!”

Voke takes a closer look at the dummy's eyes, and his own begin to lower with dark intentness. He leans his head against the booth for the closest possible scrutiny, his hands adhering to the glass as if by the force of some powerful suction. Finally, Voke sees that the dummy's eyes have changed. They are now dripping little drops of blood which roll slowly down shiny cheeks.

Voke pulls himself away from the booth and turns to Veech.

“You've been t*ampering* with him!” he bellows as best he can.

Veech blinks a few leftover tears of berserk laughter out of his eyes, and his lips form a smile. “I didn't do a thing,” he whispers mockingly. “Don't blame me for your troubles!”

Voke seems to be momentarily paralyzed with outrage, though his face is twisted by a thousand thoughts of action.

Veech apparently is aware of the danger and his eyes search throughout the room, possibly for a means of escape or for a weapon to use against his antagonist. He fixes on something and begins to move toward it in a crouch.

“Where do you think you're going?” says Voke, now liberated from the disabling effects of his rage.

Veech is trying to reach something on the floor that is the approximate shape and size of a coffin. Only part of the long black box sticks out of the shadows into the bluish-green irradiance of the loft. A thick strip of burnished silver edges the object and is secured to it with heavy bolts.

“Get away from there,” shouts Voke as Veech stoops over the box, fingering its lid.

But before he can open it, before he can make another move, Voke makes his.

“I've done my best for you, Mr. Veech, and you've given me nothing but grief. I've tried to deliver you from the fate of your friends... but now I deliver you to it.”

At these words, Veech's body begins to rise in a puppet's hunch, then soars up into the tenebrous rafters and beyond, transported by unseen wires. His arms and legs twitch uncontrollably during the elevation, and his screams... fade.

But Voke pays no attention to his victim's progress. His baggy clothes fluttering, he rushes to the object so recently threatened with violation and drags it toward an open spot on the floor. The light from the walls shines on the coffin's silky black surface. Voke is on his knees before the long box, tenderly testing its security with his fingertips. As if each accumulated moment of deliberation were a blasphemy, he suddenly lifts back the lid.

Laid out inside is a young woman whose beauty has been unnaturally perpetuated by a fanatic of her form. Voke gazes for some time at the corpse. Then he whispers to her who cannot hear him: “Always the best thing, my dear. Always the best thing.”

He is still kneeling before the coffin as his features begin to undergo the ravages of various, obviously conflicting, phases of feeling. Eyes, mouth, the whole facial structure is called upon to perform gruesome acrobatics of expression. Ultimately, the strain of Voke's inner turmoil resolves itself in a fit of convulsive laughter: the liberating laughter of an antic derangement. By the powers of his idiotic hilarity, Voke rises to his feet and begins to caper about, wildly dancing to absent music with an invisible partner. Hopping and bouncing and bobbing, he seems to be overtaken by a bout of seizures, while his laughter turns into a hoarse cacophony. Through complete absence of mind, or perhaps because he has momentarily gained possession of himself, Voke makes his way out of the loft and is now laughing into the dark abyss beyond the precarious railing at the top of the crooked stairway. His final laugh seems to stick in his throat as over the railing he falls without a sound.

Thus the screams you now hear are not those of the plummeting Voke or the hapless Veech, both of them gone into what dark regions none can say. Nor are they the last echoes of Prena and Lamm's cries of horror. These screams, the ones from beyond the doorway at the top of the stairs, belong only to a helpless dummy who now feels warm drops of blood sliding down his lacquered cheeks. For the Ticket Man has been left—alone and alive—in the shadows of an abandoned loft. And his eyes are rolling like mad marbles.

Dr. Voke and Mr. Veech (1989 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

First published in *Grimoire* #5, 1983

There is a stairway. It climbs crooked up the side of total darkness. Yet its outlines are visible, like a scribble of lightning engraved upon a black sky. And though standing unsupported, it does not fall. Nor does it end its jagged ascent until it has reached the obscure loft where Voke, the recluse, has cloistered himself. Someone named Cheev is making his way up the stairway, which seems to trouble him somehow. Though the angular scaffolding as a whole is secure enough, Cheev appears hesitant to place his full weight on the individual steps. A victim of vague misgivings, he ascends in weird mincing movements. Every so often he looks back over his shoulder at the stairs he has just stepped upon, as if expecting to see the imprints of his soles there, as if the stairs are not made of solid wood but molded of soft clay. But the stairs are unchanged.

Cheev is wearing a long, brightly colored coat. The huge splinters on the railing of the stairway sometimes snag his bulky sleeves. They also snag his bony hands, but Cheev is more exasperated by the destruction of expensive cloth than undear flesh. While climbing, he sucks at a small puncture in his forefinger to keep from staining his coat with blood. At the seventeenth stair above the seventeenth, and last,

landing—he trips. The long tails of the coat become tangled between Cheev's legs and there is a ripping sound as he falls. At the end of his patience, Cheev removes the coat and flings it over the side of the stairway into the black abyss. Cheev's arms and legs are very thin.

There is only a single door at the top of the stairs. Behind it is Voke's loft, which appears to be a cross between a playroom and a place of torture. No doubt Cheev notices this when, with five widely splayed fingers pushing against the door, he enters.

The darkness and silence of the great room are compromised only by noisy jets of blue-green light flickering spasmodically along the walls. But for the most part the room lies buried in shadows. Even its exact height is uncertain, since above the convulsive illumination almost nothing can be seen by even the sharpest pair of eyes, never mind Cheev's squinting little slits. Part of the lower cagework of the crisscrossing rafters is visible, but the ceiling is entirely obscured, if in fact Voke's sanctum has been provided with one.

Somewhere above the gritty floor, more than a few lifesize dolls hang suspended by wires which gleam and look gummy like wetted strands of a spider web. But none of the dolls is seen in whole: the longbeaked profile of one juts into the light; the shiny satin legs of another find their way out of the upper dimness; a beautifully pale hand glows in the distance; while much closer the better part of a harlequin dangles into view, cut off at the neck by blackness. Much of the inventory of this vast room appears only as parts and pieces of objects which manage to push their way out of the smothering dark. Upon the grainy floor, a long low box thrusts a corner of itself into the scene, showing off rein-

forced edges of bright metal strips plugged with heavy bolts. Pointed and strangely shaped instruments bloom out of the loam of shadows; they are crusted with... age. A great wheel appears at quarter-phase in the room's night. Other sections, appendages, and gear-works of curious machines complicate this immense gallery.

As Cheev progresses through the half-light, he is suddenly halted by a metal arm with a soft black handle. He backs off and continues to shuffle through the chamber, grinding sawdust, sand, perhaps pulverized stars underfoot. The dismembered limbs of dolls and puppets are strewn about the floor, drained of their stuffings. Posters, signs, billboards, and leaflets of various sorts are scattered around like playing cards, their bright words disarranged into nonsense. Countless other objects, devices, and leftover goods stock the room, more than one could possibly take notice of. But they are all, in some way, like those which have been described. One wonders, then, how they could all add up to such an atmosphere of... isn't *repose* the word? Yes, but a certain kind of repose: the repose of ruin.

“Voke,” Cheev calls out. “Doctor, are you here?”

Within the darknesss ahead a tall rectangle suddenly appears, like a ticket-seller's booth at a carnival. The lower part is composed of wood and the upper part of glass; its interior is lit up by an oily red glare. Slumped forward on its seat inside the booth, as if asleep, is a well-dressed dummy: nicely-fitting black jacket and vest with bright silver buttons, a white high-collar shirt with silver cufflinks, and a billowing cravat which displays a pattern of moons and stars. Because his head is forwardly inclined, the dummy's only feature of note is the black sheen of its painted hair.

Cheev approaches the booth a little cautiously. He fails to notice, or considers irrelevant, the inanimate character of the figure inside. Through a semi-circular opening in of the glass, Cheev slides his hand into the booth, apparently with the intention of giving the dummy's arm a shake. But before his own arm creeps very far toward its goal, several things occur in succession: the dummy casually lifts its head and opens its eyes… it reaches out and places its wooden hand on Cheev's hand of flesh… and its jaw drops open to dispense a mechanical laugh—yah-ha-ha-ha-ha, yah-ha-ha-ha-ha.

Wresting his hand away from the lurid dummy, Cheev staggers backward a few chaotic steps. The dummy continues to give forth its mocking laughter, which flaps its way into every niche of the evil loft and flies back as peculiar echoes. The dummy's face is vacant and handsome; its eyes roll like mad marbles. Then, from out of the shadows behind the dummy's booth, steps a figure that is every bit as thin as Cheev, though much taller. His outfit is not unlike the dummy's, but the clothes hang on him, and what there is left of his sparse hair falls like old rags across his bone-white scalp.

"Did you ever wonder, Mr. Veech," Voke begins, parading slowly toward his guest while holding one side of his coat like the train of a gown, "did you ever wonder what it is that makes the animation of a wooden dummy so horrible to see, not to mention to hear. Listen to it, I mean really listen. Ya-ha-ha-ha-ha: a stupid series of sounds that becomes excruciatingly eloquent when uttered by the Ticket Man. They are a species of poetry that sings what should not be sung, that speaks what should not be spoken. But what in the world is it laughing about. Nothing, it would seem. No clear motives

or impulses make the dummy laugh, and yet it does! Ya-ha-ha-ha-ha, just as pure and as evil as can be.

"'What is this laughter for?' you might be wondering, Mr. Veech. It seems to be for your ears alone, doesn't it? It seems to be directed at every nameless secret of your being. It seems... knowing. And it is knowing, but in another way from what you suppose, in another direction entirely. It is not you the dummy knows, it is only itself. The question is not: 'What is the laughter for,' not at all. The question is: 'Where does it come from?' This is the thing of real horror, in fact. The dummy terrorizes you, while he is really the one in terror.

"Think of it: *wood waking up*. I can't put it any clearer than that. And let's not forget the paint for the hair and lips, the glass for the eyes. These too are aroused from a sleep that should never have been broken; these too are now part of a tingling network of dummy-nerves, alive and aware in a way we cannot begin to imagine. This is something too painful for tears and so the dummy laughs in your face, trying to give vent to an evil that was no part of his old home of wood and paint and glass. But this evil is now the very essence of its new home—our world, Mr. Veech. This is what is so horrible about the laughing Ticket Man. Go to sleep now, dummy. There, he has his nice silence back. Be glad I didn't make one that screams, Mr. Veech. And be glad the dummy is, after all, just a device.

"Well, to what do I owe your presence here today. It is day, isn't it, or very close to it?"

"Yes, it is," replies Cheev.

"Good, I like to keep abreast of things. What's your latest?" Voke inquires, proceeding to saunter slowly about

and admiring the clutter of his loft.

Cheev leans back against a vague mound of indefinable objects and stares at the floor. He sounds drowsy. “I wouldn't have come here, but I didn't know what else to do. How can I tell you? The past days and nights, especially the nights, like icy hells. I suppose I should say that there is someone…”

“Whom you have taken a liking to,” Voke finishes.

“Yes, but then there is someone else…”

“Who is somehow an obstacle, someone whose existence helps to insure that your nights will be frosty ones. This seems very straightforward. Tell me, what is her name, the first someone?”

“Prena,” answers Cheev after some hesitation.

“And his, the second.”

“Lamm, but why do you need their names to help me?”

“Their names, like your name, and mine for that matter, are of no actual importance. I was just maintaining a polite interest in your predicament, nothing more. As for helping you, that assumes I have some control over this situation, which thankfully I don't.”

“But I thought,” stammers Cheev, “the loft, your devices, you seem to have a certain… knowledge.”

“Like the dummy's knowledge? You shouldn't have depended on it. Now you just have one more disappointment to contend with. One more pain. But listen, can't you just stick it out? For one reason or another, you could end up forgetting all about this Prena, this Lamm; you might come to realize that they are merely two shadows sewn together by their own delirium. It's something to consider. Anything can happen in this world of ours.”

“I can't wait anymore, Doctor,” says Cheev in a nervous, shadowy voice.

“Well, you know what they say: Something is no worse than something or other with your own shadow. I forget exactly how it goes.”

“I am my own shadow,” Cheev replies.

“Yes, I can see that. Listen now, let us speak hypothetically for a moment. Are you familiar with the Street of Wavering Peaks? I know it has a more common name, but I like to call it that because of all those tall, slanty houses.”

Cheev nods to indicate that he too knows the street.

“Well—and I promise nothing, remember, I make no pledges or vows—but if you can somehow manage to bring both of your friends through that street tonight, I think there might be a solution to your problem, if you really want one. Do you mind what form the solution takes?”

Cheev timidly turns his head side to side, meaning he does not mind.

“You really are serious, aren't you?”

Cheev says nothing in reply. Voke shrugs and gradually fades back to his point of origin within the deepest shadows of the room. The red light in the booth of the Ticket Man also fades like a setting sun, until the only color left in the room is the ultramarine of the flames burning on the walls. Cheev continues to gaze into the upper reaches of the loft for a few more moments, as if he can already see the slender rooftops of the houses in the Street of Wavering Peaks.

By night, façades of the houses on either side of this narrow street are fused, as if cut from a single piece of very old cardboard. Bonded by shadows and plastered together by moonlight, one house undulates into the next. Aside from

their foundations and a few floors with shuttered windows, they are all roof. Splendidly they rise into the night, often reaching fantastic altitudes. At angles determined by an unknown system of forces and fixed forever on destiny's tilt, they fall into and across the sky.

Tonight the sky is a swamp of murky clouds glowing in the false fire of the moon. From the direction of the street's arched entranceway, three approaching figures are preceded by three elongated shadows. One figure walks ahead, leading the way but lacking the proper gestures of knowledge and authority. Behind are the shapes of a man and a woman, side by side with only a slice of evening's soft radiance between them.

Toward the end of the street, the leading figure stops and the other two catch up with him. They are now all three standing outside one of the loftiest of the peaked houses. This house appears also to serve as a business of some kind, since a large sign, which swings a little in the wind and is muddled by shadows, displays a painted picture of the goods or services sold there: a pair of tongs, or something similar, laying crosswise upon what is perhaps a poker, or some other lengthy implement. But the business is closed for the night and the shutters are secured. A round attic window high above seems to be no more than an empty socket, though from the street—where the three figures have assumed the tentative postures of somnambulists—it is difficult to tell exactly what things are like up there. And now a fog begins to cut off their gaze from the upper regions of the Street of Wavering Peaks.

Cheev looks vaguely distressed, apparently unsure just how much longer they should loiter in this place. Not being

privy to what is supposed to occur, if anything, what action should he take? All he can do at the moment is stall. But everything is soon brought to a conclusion, very quickly yet without a sense of haste or violence.

One moment Cheev is drowsily conversing with his two companions, both of them looking sternly suspicious at this point; the next moment it is as if they are two puppets who have been whisked upwards on invisible strings, into the fog and out of sight. It all happens so suddenly that they do not make a sound, though a little later there are faint, hollow screams from high above. Cheev has fallen to his knees and is covering his face with his bony hands. Two went up, but only one comes down, suspended a few inches from the ground and swinging a little in the wind. Cheev uncovers his eyes and looks at the thing. Yes, there is only one, but this one has too many... there is too much of everything on this body. Two faces sharing a single head, two mouths that have fallen silent forever with parted lips. The thing continues to hang in the air even after Cheev has completely collapsed on the Street of Wavering Peaks.

*

Voke's next meeting with Cheev is as unexpected as the last one. There is a disturbance in the loft, and the rigid recluse lugs his bones out of the shadows to investigate. What he sees is Cheev and the Ticket Man both screaming with laughter. Their cachinnations stir up the stagnant air of the loft; they are two maniac twins crying and cackling with a single voice.

“What's going on here, Mr. Veech?” demands Voke.

Cheev ignores him and continues his laughing duet with the dummy. Even after Voke touches the booth and says, “Go to sleep, dummy,” Cheev still laughs all by himself, as if he too is an automaton without control over his actions. Voke knocks Cheev to the floor, which seems to hit the right mechanism to shut off his voice. At least he is quiet for a few moments. Then he raises his eyes from the floor and glares up at Voke.

“Why did you have to do that to them?” he asks with a deeply stricken reproachfulness. His voice is rough from all that laughter; it sounds like grinding machinery.

“I'm not going to pretend I don't know what you're talking about. I have heard about what happened, not that I should care. But you can't hold me responsible, Mr. Veech. I never leave my loft, you know that. However, you're perfectly free to go, if you go now. Haven't you caused me enough trouble!”

“Why did it have to happen like that?” Cheev protests.

“How should I know? You said you didn't mind what form the solution to your problem took. Besides, I think it all worked out for the best. Those two were making a fool of you, Mr. Veech. They wanted each other and now they have each other, so to speak, while you are free to move on to your next disaster. Wait one moment, I know what's bothering you,” says Voke with sudden enlightenment. “You're distressed because it all ended up with *their* demise and not yours. Death is always the best thing, Mr. Veech, but who would have thought you could appreciate such a view? I've underestimated you, no doubt about it. My apologies.”

“No,” screams Cheev, quivering like a sick animal. Voke now becomes excited.

“No? Noooo? What is the matter with you, young friend? Why do you set me up for these disappointments? I've had quite enough without your adding to the heap. Take a lesson from the Ticket Man here. Do you see him whining? No, he is silent, he is still. A dummy's silence is the most soothing silence of all, and his stillness is the perfect stillness of the unborn. He could be making a fuss, but he isn't. And it is precisely his lack of action, his unfulfilled nature that makes him the ideal companion, my only true friend it seems. Deadwood, I adore you. Look at how his hands rest upon his lap in empty prayer. Look at the noble bearing of his collapsed and powerless limbs. Look at his numb lips muttering nothing, and look at those eyes—how they gaze on and on forever!”

Voke takes a closer look at the dummy's eyes, and his own begin to lower with dark intentness. He leans against the booth for the closest possible scrutiny, his hands adhering to the glass as if by the force of some powerful suction. Inside the booth, the dummy's eyes have changed. They are now dripping little drops of blood, which appear black in the red haze surrounding him.

Voke pulls himself away from the booth and turns to Cheev.

“You've been t*ampering* with him!” he bellows as best he can.

Cheev blinks a few leftover tears of false laughter out of his eyes, and his lips form a true smile. “I didn't do a thing,” he whispers mockingly. “Don't blame me for your troubles!”

Voke seems to be momentarily paralyzed with outrage, though his face is twisted by a thousand thoughts of action. Cheev apparently is aware of the danger and his eyes search

throughout the room, possibly for a means of escape or for a weapon to use against his antagonist. He fixes on something and begins to move toward it in a crouch.

“Where do you think you're going?” says Voke, now liberated from the disabling effects of his rage.

Cheev is trying to reach something on the floor that is the approximate size and shape of a coffin. Only one corner of the long black box sticks out of the shadows into the bluish green glare of the loft. A thick strip of gleaming silver edges the object and is secured to it with silvery bolts.

“Get away from there,” shouts Voke as Cheev stoops over the box, fingering its lid.

But before he can open it, before he can make another move, Voke makes his.

“I've done my best for you, Mr. Veech, and you've given me nothing but grief. I've tried to deliver you from the fate of your friends... but now I deliver you to it. Join them, *Cheev*. “

At these words, Cheev's body begins to rise in a puppet's hunch, then soars up into the tenebrous rafters and beyond, transported by unseen wires. His arms and legs twitch uncontrollably during the elevation, and his screams... fade.

But Voke pays no attention to his victim's progress. His baggy clothes flapping hysterically, he rushes to the object so recently threatened with violation. He drags it toward an open spot on the floor. The light from the walls, ghastly and oceanic, shines on the coffin's silky black surface. Voke is on his knees before the coffin, tenderly testing its security with his fingertips. As if each accumulated moment of deliberation were a blasphemy, he suddenly lifts back the lid.

Laid out inside is a young woman whose beauty has been unnaturally perpetuated by a fanatic of her form. Voke gazes for some time at the corpse, then finally says: “Always the best thing, my dear. Always the best thing.”

He is still kneeling before the coffin as his features begin to undergo the ravages of various, obviously conflicting, phases of feeling. Eyes, mouth, the whole facial structure is called upon to perform gruesome acrobatics of expression. Ultimately an impossible task is relieved or avoided by laughter: the liberating laughter of an innocent derangement, of a virgin madness. Voke rises to his feet by the powers of his idiotic hilarity. He begins to move about in a weird dance—hopping and bouncing and bobbing. His laughter grows worse as he gyres aimlessly, and his gestures become more convulsive. Through complete lack of attention, or perhaps by momentarily regaining it, Voke makes his way out of the loft and is now laughing into the dark abyss beyond the precarious railing at the top of the crooked stairway. His final laugh seems to stick in his throat; he goes over the railing and falls without a sound, his baggy clothes flapping uselessly.

Thus the screams you now hear are not those of the plummeting Voke. Neither are they the screams of Cheev, who is long gone, nor the supernatural echoes of Prena and Lamm's cries of horror. These screams, the ones from beyond the door at the top of the stairs, belong only to a dummy who now feels warm drops of blood sliding thickly over his lacquered cheeks, and who has been left—alone and alive—in the shadows of an abandoned loft. And his eyes are rolling like mad marbles.

Eye Of The Lynx (2010 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

First published in *Nyctalops* #18, 1983

I had been on her psychic frequency for some time, but other matters delayed our meeting in the flesh. During the frigid months of the past year I was a busy boy, and a naughty one. The relevant agencies had finally fixed on the type of companion I preferred, and warnings went out by word of mouth, or rather *lips* painted so shiny in certain shades, mostly blood red but also pall-bearer black. The underground world in which I moved was on the alert: don't talk to strangers and so on. That was not a problem, though. Such wariness just incited my impulses all the more and increased the number of "Missing Girls in Gothic Garb," as one journalistic source fatuously described my activities. Thus my meeting with her had been belated due to unscheduled distractions, or so I thought at the time. But now I was standing on the sidewalk right outside her place of business. The doorway to the crummy cinder-block building was done up, rather ineptly, like a castle with toothy merlons. I looked over at the traffic light bobbing in the winter wind that howled through every corner of that desolate part of town. It was amber going on red. I looked back at the door. It actually creaked when I opened it.

Inside I was greeted by a reception committee of girls lounging in what looked like old church pews along the walls. The narrow vestibule in which I found myself scintillated with a reddish haze that seemed not so much light as electric vapor. In the far upper corner of this entranceway a closed circuit camera was bearing down on us all, and I wondered how the camera's eye would translate that redly dyed room into the bluish hues of a security monitor. Not that it was any of my business. We might all be electronically meshed into a crazy purpurean tapestry, and that would have been just fine.

A fair-haired girl in denim slacks and leather jacket stood up and approached me. In the present light her blond locks looked more like tomato soup or greasy ketchup than fresh strawberry. She delivered a mechanical statement that began “Welcome to the House of Chains,” and went on and on, spelling out various services and specific terms and finally concluding with a legal disclaimer to make sure I wasn't a member of the law enforcement community. “Definitely not,” I said. “I was just reading a local tabloid and saw your ad, the one set in spiky Gothic type like a page out of an old German bible. I've come to the right place, haven't I?”

“You sure have,” I thought to myself. “You sure have,” echoed the blonde in the bloody moonlight that suffused that perverse establishment. “What will it be tonight?” I inwardly asked myself. “What will it be tonight?” she asked aloud. “Do you see anything you like?” we both asked me at the same time. From my expression and casual glances somewhere beyond the claustrophobic space of that tiny foyer, she could tell right away that I didn't see anything I liked. We were on the same infrared wavelength.

Both of us stood there for a moment while she took a long sip from a can of iced tea. It was then that I realized the true reason I had taken my time getting to her. I was saving this girl for last because she was such a rare exemplar of her kind. She was no dabbler in darkness and degeneracy, but a real pro. Plus the intensity and focus of her romantic nature gave off a signal that I knew I wouldn't lose. On the outside she played tough, yet I could see through that to an under-self who dreamed of persecutions and imperilments as glamorous as those of any Gothic heroine. I could have unzipped myself and taken her right on the spot. But I'm glad I waited.

She pushed a button next to an intercom on the wall behind her and turned her head to transmit some words. Their tone sounded like that of a boss giving orders to one of her underlings.

“Come and take over for me at the door,” she said with authority. What irony that she was the supervisor of the place, the head-mistress of a school for bad boys.

She turned back my way and gave me the up and down with her violet eyes. And what did those eyes tell me? They told me of her life as she lived it in fantasy: a Gothic tale of a baroness deprived of her title and inheritance by a big man with bushy eyebrows which he sometimes sprinkled with glitter. By her impoverishment, the glitter-browed man, who came out of the forest one spring while she was in retreat at a Carmelite nunnery, intended to force her into his arms. But the high-born lady would not succumb, or not until she was ready. And now she spends much of her time haunting second-hand shops, trying to reclaim her aristocratic accoutrements and various articles of her wardrobe which were dispersed by her villainous suitor. So far she's

done pretty well for herself, managing to assemble many of the items she had lost as a result of the machinations of an evil-hearted malefactor who would dominate her body and soul. Her collection includes several dresses in her favorite shade of monastic black. Each of them tapers in severely under the bustline, while belling out below the waist. A bib-like bodice buttons in her ribs, ascending to her neck where a strip of dark velvet is seized by a pearl brooch. At her wrist: a frail chain from which dangles a heart-shaped locket, a whirlpooling lock of golden hair inside. She wears gloves, of course, long and powdery pale. And tortuous hats from a mad milliner, with dependent veils like the fine cloth screen in a confessional. But she prefers her enveloping hoods, the ones that gather with innumerable folds at the shoulders of heavy capes lined in satin that shines like a black sun. Capes with deep pockets and generous inner pouches for secreting precious souvenirs, capes with silk strings that tie about her neck, capes with weighted hems which nonetheless flutter weightlessly in midnight gusts. She loves them dearly.

Just so is she attired when the glitter-browed villain peers in her apartment window, accursing the casement and her dreams. What can she do but shrink with terror? Soon she is only doll-size in dark doll's costume. Quivering bones and feverish blood are the stuffings of this doll, its entrails tickled by fear's funereal plume. It flies to a corner of the room and cringes within enormous shadows, sometimes dreaming there throughout the night—of carriage wheels rioting in a lavender mist or a pearly fog, of nacreous fires twitching beyond the margins of country roads, of cliffs and stars. Then she awakes and pops a mint into her mouth from an unraveled roll on the nightstand, afterwards smoking

half a cigarette before crawling out of bed and grimacing in the light of late afternoon.

“C'mon,” she said with both hands in her leather pockets. And her loud heels led me out of that room where every face wore a fake blush.

“So you're going to give me the ninety-eight cent tour?” I asked my hostess. “I'm from out of town. We don't have anything like this place where I come from. I'm going to get what I pay for, right?”

She smirked at me. “Satisfaction guaranteed,” she said with an arrogance meant to keep under wraps her poignantly submissive nature. She moved in a couple of indecisive directions before guiding me toward some metal steps which clanged as we descended into a blur of crimson shadows, the vicious vapor trailing us, tagging along like an insanely devoted familiar.

Surprisingly enough, there was a window in the vaguely institutional basement of the House of Chains. However, it was only a simulation made of empty panes beyond which was a painted landscape illuminated by a low-watt light bulb. Pictured were vast regions of sublime desolation towered over by mountains hulking in hazy twilight. In the distance loomed a castle that looked thoroughly foreboding. I felt a bit like a child standing before a display window at a department store model of Santa's workshop. But I can't say it didn't create a mood.

“Nice painting,” I said to my companion. “Very creepy. My compliments to the artist.”

“The artist is flattered,” she said coldly. “But there's not much else to see down here, if that's the kind of thing you're looking for. Just a couple of rooms reserved for special cli-

ents. If you want to see something creepy, go to the end of that hall and open the door on the right."

I followed her instructions. On the door handle hung a rather large animal collar at the end of a chain leash. The chain jingled a little when I pushed open the door. The red light in the hallway barely allowed me to see inside, but there was little to see anyway except a small, empty room. Its floor was bare cement and there was straw laid down upon it. The smell was terrific.

"Well?" she asked when I returned down the hallway.

"It's something at least," I answered, winking the subtlest possible wink. We just stood for a moment gazing at each other in a light the color of fresh meat. Then she led me back upstairs.

"Where did you say you're from?" she asked as that noisy stairway amplified our footsteps into reverberant echoes that made it sound like we were traipsing through a castle hall.

"It's a real small place," I replied. "About a hundred miles outstate. It's not even on the maps."

"And you've never been to a place like this before?"

"Uh-uh, never," I lied.

"Because some customers run amok when they experience for real what they've only seen in magazines and movies, you know what I mean?"

"I won't do anything like that. I promise."

"Okay, then. Let's go."

We went.

And there was much to see on the way—a Punch and Judy panorama with characters of all kinds as well as the oc-

casional whacking stick. Each scene flipped by like a page in a depraved storybook.

Locked doors were no obstacle for my eyes.

Behind one, where every wall of the room was painted with heavy black bars from floor to ceiling, the Queen of Pain—riding crop raised high—sat atop her human horse. The animal looked hobbled and harnessed. So it couldn't run but only lumber lamely around, with the Queen growing out of its back like a Siamese twin, her royal blood and his beast's now flowing together, tributaries from distant worlds mingling in a hybrid harmony. The creature was panting heavily as the Queen beat time upon its flanks with her stinging crop. Harder and harder she rode her steed before it finally pulled up, foaming and sweaty. Time to cool down, horsy.

Behind another door, one with a swastika painted sloppily across its front, was a scene similar to the previous. Inside, some colored lights were angled down upon the floor, where a very small man, his hunchback possibly artificial, knelt with head bowed low. His hands were lost in a pair of enormous gloves with shapeless fingers which lolled around like ten drunken jacks-in-the-box. One of the fingers was trapped beneath the pointy toe of a high boot. See the funny clown! Or rather *jester* in a jingly cap. His ringed eyes patiently gazed upwards into the darkness, attentive to the hollow voice hurling abuse from on high. The voice was playing up the disparity between its proudly booted self and the humiliated freak upon the floor, contrasting its warrior's leaping delights with the fool's dragging sack of amusements. *But couldn't the stooping hunchback's fun be beautiful* too? his eyes

whispered with their elliptical mouths. *But couldn't*—Silence! Now the little fool was going to get it.

Behind still another door, which had no distinguishing marks, a single candle glowed through red glass, just barely keeping the room out of total blackness. It was hard to tell how many were in there—more than a couple, less than a horde. They were all wearing the same gear, little zippers and big zippers like silver stitches scarring their outfits. One very little one had an eyelash caught in it, I could tell that much. For the rest of it, they might as well have been human shadows that merged softly with one another, proclaiming threats of ultimate mayhem and wielding oversized straight razors. But though these glimmering blades were always potently poised, they never came down. It was only make-believe, just like everything else I had seen.

The next door, and for me the last, was at the end of an exhausting climb in what must have been a tower.

“Here's where you get your money's worth, mister,” said my date for the night. “I can always tell what my clients want, even if they don't know it themselves.”

“Show me your worst,” I said, eyeing the undersized door before us.

The situation here was as transparent as the others. Only this time it wasn't horses, pathetic clowns, or paranoid shadows. It was, in fact, a wicked witch and her puppet slave. The clumsy little creature had apparently behaved badly and been caught in the act. Now the witch was in the process of putting him back in line, croaking about what puppets should and should not be doing with their free time. She swept across the room draped in some kind of moth-eaten cloak she had taken from a hook on the wall, her face

sunken into its abundant hood. Behind her a stained-glass window shone with all the excommunicated tints of corruption. By the light of this infernal rainbow of wrinkled cellophane, she collared the puppet and chained him to a formidable-looking stone wall, which buckled aluminum-like when he collapsed against it. She angled down her hooded face and whispered into his wooden ear.

“Do you know what I do with bad little puppets like you?” she inquired. “Do you?”

The puppet trembled a bit for show, staying in character for the time being. He might even have worked up some perspiration had he been made of flesh and not wood.

“I'll tell you what I do with puppets who've been naughty,” the witch continued half-sweetly. “I make them touch the fire. I burn them from the legs up.”

Then, unexpectedly, the puppet smiled.

“And what will you do,” the puppet asked, “with all those old dresses, gloves, veils, and capes when I'm gone? What will you do in your low-rent castle with no one to stare, his brow of glittering silver, into the windows of your dreams?”

Perhaps the puppet was perspiring after all, for his brow was now glistening with tiny flecks of starlight.

The witch stepped back and whipped off her hood, exposing the blond hair beneath it. She wanted to know how I knew about all that stuff, which she had never divulged to anyone. She accused me of peeping-tomism, of breaking and entering, and of illicit curiosity in general.

“Let me out of these chains and I'll tell you everything,” I said.

“Forget it,” she answered. “I'm going to get someone to throw you out of here.”

“Then I'll just have to release myself.” At these words, the manacles around my ankles, my wrists, and my throat opened by themselves… and the chains fell away. “You can't pretend,” I continued, “that there isn't something familiar about me. After all we've meant to each other, after all we've done together, over and over and over. You see, I also know the desires of *my* clients, or so I might call them. Newscasters call them victims. They show their faces on television. I make them famous, though my part in their renown is a mystery to all. And mystery is what does it for you, is that not so? The thrill of not knowing what will happen next. But here it's all by the numbers. You've been cooped up in this silly place far too long. For someone like you, that can be deadly. You've always known you were special, don't deny it. You've always believed that someday—and it was always just around the corner, wasn't it?—great things were going to happen, rapturous adventures that weren't quite clear, yet when they happened would be real. As real as the velvet embrace of your favorite cape, the one with the silver chain that draws together its curtain-like wings across your bosom. As real as the tall candles you light on stormy nights. You love those storms, don't you, with their chains of raindrops whipping against your windows. All that pandemonium drives you wild. And the enthralling cruelties you imagine visited upon you in the candlelight by the man with the spangled eyebrows. How they make you swoon so helplessly.

“But now you're in danger of losing everything you really love, which is why I showed up tonight. You've got to get out of this tacky sideshow. This is for hicks, this is small time. You can do much better. I can take you places where the ra-

ging storms and brutal subjugations never end. Please, don't back away from me. There's nowhere to go and your eyes tell me you want the same things I do. If you're worried about the hardships of traveling to strange faraway places—don't! You're almost there now. Just fall into my arms, into my heart, into... There, that was easy, wasn't it?"

Now she was inside of me with all the others—the prize possession in my gallery of frail little dolls with souls given over to wild-wind nights and sadistic villains. How I loved to play with them.

After the assimilation, I retraced my steps up and down stairways and through corridors of scarlet darkness. "Goodnight, everybody!" I said to the girls in the reception room. Back out on the street, I paused to make sure she was securely incarcerated within me. In the early stages there's always the possibility that a new internee will try to unzip me from inside, so to speak, and break out the front gate. She did in fact make an attempt to free herself. It wasn't serious, though. A drunk I passed on the sidewalk saw an arm shoot out at him from underneath my shirt, projecting chest-high at a perfect right angle to the rest of me. He staggered over and with a jolly vigor shook the hand reaching blindly between the bars of its cage. Then he proceeded on his way. And I proceeded on mine once I'd got her safely back inside her fabulous prison, a captive of my heart and its infinite chambers. What times we will have together, she and I and all the rest. I can do with them as I please and I am pleased to do much. But they won't have to endure my treatment forever. I'll be back on the road by first frost next year, needing more bodies to warm me. By then, the old ones will have melted like icicles in the dank bowels of my castle home. In

the meantime, I'll be keeping a keen eye out for those who walk this world in glad submission to gloom.

As I strolled in good cheer from the House of Chains, the traffic light down that slummy street turned from amber to red—a portent of things to come for my new flame and I, now one in flesh as well as in dreams.

Eye Of The Lynx (1989 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

First published in *Nyctalops* #18, 1983

No architectural go-betweens divided the doorway—a side entrance off a block of diverse but connected buildings—from the sidewalk. The sidewalk itself was conjugally flush with the curb that bordered a street which in turn radiated off a boulevard of routine clamor, and all of this was enveloped by December's musty darkness. Sidewalk doorway, doorway sidewalk. I don't want to make too much of the matter, except to say that this peculiarity, if it was one, made an impression on me: there was no physical introduction to the doorway, surely not in the form of a little elevated slab of cement, certainly not even a single stair of stone. No structure of any kind prefaced the door. And it was recessed into the building itself with such deliberate shallowness that it almost looked painted directly onto the wall. I looked over at the traffic light above the intersection; it was amber going on red. I looked back at the door. The sidewalk seemed to slip right under it, urging one to step inside. So I did, after noting that the wall around the doorway was done up, somewhat ineptly, like a, castle tower flanked by toothy merlons.

Inside I was immediately greeted by a reception committee of girls very professionally lounging in what looked like old church pews along an old wall. The narrow vestibule in

which I found myself scintillated with a reddish haze that seemed not so much light as electric vapor. In the far upper corner of this entranceway a closed circuit camera was bearing down on us all, and I wondered how the camera's eye would translate that redly dyed room into the bluish hues of a security monitor. Not that it was any of my business. We might all be electronically meshed into a crazy purpurean tapestry, and that would have been just fine.

A fair-haired girl in denim slacks and leather jacket stood up and approached me. In the present light her blondness was actually more a murky tomato soup or greasy ketchup than fresh strawberry. She delivered a mechanical statement that began “Welcome to the House of Chains,” and went on and on, spelling out various services and specific terms and finally concluding with a legal disclaimer of some carefully phrased sort. “Yes, yes,” I said. “I've read the ads, the ones set in that spikey Gothic type, the ones that look like a page out of an old German bible. I've come to the right place, haven't I?”

“Sure you have,” I thought to myself. “Sure you have,” echoed the blonde with blood-dyed hair. “What will it be tonight?” I inwardly asked me. “What will it be tonight?” she asked aloud. “Do you see anything you like?” we both asked me at the same time. From my expression and casual glances somewhere beyond the claustrophobic space of that tiny foyer, she could see right away that I didn't see anything, or at least that I wanted her to think I didn't. We were on the same infra-red wavelength.

We stood there for a moment while she took a long delicious sip from a can of iced tea, pretending with half-closed eyes that it was the best thing she'd ever washed her insides

with. Then she pushed a button next to an intercom on the wall behind her and turned her head to whisper some words, though still keeping those violent eyes hooked on mine.

And what did those eyes tell me? They told me of her life as she lived it in fantasy: a Gothic tale of a baronness deprived of her title and inheritance by a big man with bushy eyebrows, which he sometimes sprinkles with glitter. (She once dreamed that he did.) And now this high-born lady spends much of her time haunting second-hand shops, trying to reclaim her aristocratic accoutrements and various articles of her wardrobe which were dispersed at auction by the glitter-browed man who came out of the forest one spring when she was away visiting a Carmelite nunnery. So far she's done pretty well for herself, managing to assemble many items that for her are charged with sentiment. Her collection includes several dresses in her favorite shade of monastic black. Each of them tapers in severely under the bustline, while belling-out below the waist. A bib-like bodice buttons in her ribs, ascending to her neck where a strip of dark velvet is seized by a pearl brooch. Ar her wrist: a frail chain from which dangles a heart-shaped locket, a whirlpooling lock of golden hair inside. She wears gloves, of course, long and powdery pale. And tortuous hats from a mad milliner, with dependent veils like the fine cloth screen in a confessional, delicate flags of mourning repentance. But she prefers her enveloping hoods, the ones that gather with innumerable folds at the shoulders of heavy capes lined in satin that shines like a black sun. Capes with deep pockets and generous inner pouches for secreting precious souvenirs, capes with silk strings that tie about her neck, capes with

weighted hems which nonetheless flutter weightlessly in midnight gusts. She loves them dearly.

Just so is she attired when the glitter-browed villain peers in her apartment window, accursing the casement and her dreams. What can she do but shrink with terror? Soon she is only doll-size in dark doll's costume, Nevertheless, quivering bones and feverish blood are the stuffings of this doll, its entrails tickled by fear's funereal plume. It flies to a corner of the room and cringes within enormous shadows, sometimes dreaming there throughout the night—of carriage wheels rioting in a lavender mist or a pearly fog, of nacreous fires twitching beyond the margins of country roads, of cliffs and stars. Then she awakes and pops a mint into her mouth from an unravelled roll on the nightstand, afterwards smoking half a cigarette before crawling out of bed and grimacing in the light of late afternoon.

“C'mon,” she said after releasing the button of the intercom. “I think I can help you.”

“But I thought you couldn't leave the reception area,” I explained, almost apologetically. “Of course, if I'd known…”

“C'mon,” she repeated with both hands in her jacket pockets. And her loud heels led me out of that room where every face wore a fake blush.

We walked though a pair of swinging doors which met in the middle and were bound like books, imitation leather tightly stretched across their broad boards and thick spines.

Title page:

House of Chains,
A Romance in Red
Decorated

with
Divers Woodcuts

Page one: Deep into December, as the winds of winter howled beyond the walls, two children, one blond and the other dark, found themselves in the heart of a great castle in the heart of a gloomy forest. The central chamber of the castle, as is a heart's wont, glowed with a warm red light, though the surrounding masonry was of damp gray stone. A great many people of the court capered about, traveling aloft or below by means of sundry stairways, ingressing and egressing through the queerly shaped portals of shadowed corridors (which seemed everywhere), and thronging here and there as in the curious bazaars of oriental scenes. Uncouth voices and harsh music fell upon the children's ears.

Decoration opposite opening page: Two children, one blond and the other not; passing through a tunnel of tangled forest which looks as if it's about to descend and devour them both. The girl, open mouthed, is pointing with her left hand while holding onto her brother with the right; the boy, all eyes, seems to be gazing in every direction at once, amazed at the pair's wondrous incarceration.

“Can I get the ninety-eight cent tour,” I asked my hostess. “I'm from out of town. We don't have anything like this where I come from. I'm paying for this, right?”

Half of her mouth found it possible to smirk. “Sure,” she said, drawing out the word well past its normal duration. She moved in a couple of false directions before guiding me toward some metal steps which clanged as we descended into a blur of crimson shadows. The vicious vapor followed

us downstairs, of course, tagging along like an insanely devoted familiar.

Surprisingly enough, there was a window in the vaguely institutional basement of the House of Chains (I was beginning to enjoy that name), but it was composed of empty panes looking out upon a phony landscape. Pictured were vast regions of volcanic desolation towered over by prehistoric mountains which poked into a dead-end darkness. The scene was illuminated by a low-watt bulb. I felt a bit like a child peeking into a department store model of Santa's workshop, but I can't say it didn't create a mood.

"'Nice painting," I said to my companion. "Kind of spooky, don't you think?" I looked at her for a reply to my patter, but no counter-patter was forthcoming. She simply stared at me as if I'd just told a joke she didn't get.

"There's not much down here," she finally said. "Just a couple of hallways that don't go anywhere and a bunch of rooms, most of them locked. If you want to see something spooky, go to the end of that hall and open the door on the right."

I faithfully followed her instructions. On the door handle hung a rather large animal collar at the end of a chain leash. The chain jingled a little when I pushed open the door. The red light in the hallway barely allowed me to see inside, but there was little to see anyway except a small, empty room. Its floor was bare cement and there was straw laid down upon it. The smell was terrific.

"Well?" she asked when I returned down the hallway.

"It's a start," I answered, winking the subtlest possible wink. We just stood for a moment gazing at each other in a light the color of fresh meat. Then she led me back upstairs.

“Where did you say you're from?” she asked as that noisy stairway amplified our footsteps into reverberant dungeon-like echoes.

“It's a real small place,” I replied. “About a hundred miles outstate. It's not even on the maps.”-

“And you've never been to a place like this before?”

“Uh-uh, never.”

She stopped at the top of the stairs. “Then before we go any further,” she said, “I want to give you some advice and tell you to go back where you came from.”

I just looked at her, shaking my head slowly and insolently.

“Okay, then. Let's go.”

We went.

And there was much to see on the way—a Punch and Judy panorama which was staged between the chasmical folds of a playhouse curtain of rich inky red, and getting redder every passing second. Each scene flipped by like a page in a story-book: that frozen stage where the players are stiffened with immortality and around which the only thing that stirs is the reader's roving eye.

Locked doors were no obstacle.

Behind one, where every wall of the room was painted with heavy black bars from floor to ceiling, the Queen of the Singing Kingdom—riding crop raised high—sat atop her magic flying leopard, which unfortunately had been recently transformed into a human. And, sadly, the animal had lost one of its paws. What good fortune that it could still fly! But did it want to? Or did it prefer to lumber lamely around its cage, with the Queen herself growing out of its back like a Siamese twin, her royal blood and his beast's now flowing

together, tributaries from distant worlds mingling in a hybrid harmony. The animal was so pleased that it yowled a tune as the Queen beat time upon its flanks with her stinging crop. Sing, leopard, sing!

Behind another door, one with a swastika splashed negligently on its front in such a way that the paint had dripped from every appendage of the spidery symbol, was a scene similar to the previous. Inside, some colored lights were angled down upon the floor, where a very small man, his hunchback possibly artificial, knelt with head bowed low. His hands were lost in a pair of enormous gloves with shapeless fingers which lolled around like ten drunken jacks-in-the-box. One of the numb fingers was trapped beneath the pointy toe at the base of a lofty boot. See the funny clown! Or rather *jester* in a jingly cap. His ringed eyes patiently gazed upwards into the darkness, attentive to the hollow voice hurling anger from on high. The voice was playing up the moral disparity between its proudly booted self and that humiliated freak upon the floor, contrasting its warrior's leaping delights with the fool's dragging sack of amusements. *But couldn't the stooping hunchback's fun be beautiful* too? his eyes whispered with their elliptical mouths. *But couldn't*— Silence! Now the little monkey was going to get it.

Behind still another door, which had no distinguishing marks, a single candle glowed through red glass, just barely keeping the room out of total blackness. It was hard to tell how many were in there, more than a couple, less than a horde. They were all wearing the same gear, little zippers and big zippers like silver stitches scarring their outfits. One very little one had an eyelash caught in it, I could tell that much. For the rest of it, they might as well have been human

shadows that merged softly with one another, proclaiming threats of ultimate mayhem and wielding oversized straight razors. But although these gleaming blades were always potently poised, they never came down. It was only make-believe, just like everything else I had seen.

The next door, and for me the last, was at the end of an exhausting climb in what must have been a tower.

“Here's where you get your money's worth, mister,” said my date, blind to the signs of apprehension—clutching my coat, lightly pawing my cheek—I was beginning to exhibit like an insecure artist about to reveal his unseen canvasses.

“Show me the worst,” I said, eyeing the undersized door before us.

The situation here was as transparent as the others. Only this time it wasn't pet leopards, pathetic clowns, or paranoid shadows. It was, in fact, two new characters: a wicked witch and her assistant in the form of an enchanted puppet. The clumsy little creature, due to an incorrigibly mischievous temperament, had behaved badly. Now the witch was in the process, which she had down to perfection, of putting him back in line. She swept across the room, her dark dress swirling like a maelstrom, her hideous face sunken into an abundant hood. Behind her a stained-glass window shone with all the excommunicated tints of corruption. By the light of this infernal rainbow of wrinkled cellophane, she collared her naughty assistant and chained him hands and feet to a formidable-looking stone wall, which buckled aluminum-like when he collapsed against it. She angled down her hooded face and whispered into his wooden ear.

“Do you know what I do with little puppets who've been bad?” she inquired. “Do you?”

The puppet trembled a bit and would have beamed bright with perspiration had he been made of flesh and not wood.

“I'll tell you what I do,” the witch continued half-sweetly. “I make them touch the fire. I burn them from the legs up.”

Then, surprisingly, the puppet smiled.

“And what will you do,” the puppet asked, “with all those old dresses, gloves, veils, and capes when I'm gone? What will you do in your low-rent castle with no one to stare, his brow of glittering silver, into the windows of your dreams?”

Perhaps the puppet was perspiring after all, for his brow was now glistening with tiny flecks of starlight.

The witch stepped back and whipped off her black hood, exposing blond hair beneath it. She wanted to know how I knew about all that stuff, which she had never revealed to anyone. She accused me of peeping-tomism, of breaking and entering, and of illicit curiosity in general.

“Let me out of these chains and I'll tell you all about myself,” I shouted.

“Forget it,” she answered. “I'm going to get someone to throw you out of here.”

“Then I'll just have to release myself,” I said more calmly.

The manacles opened around my ankles, my wrists, and the chains fell away.

“You can't pretend,” I continued as I approached her, “that there isn't something familiar about me. After all we've meant to each other, after all we've done together, over and over and over. You're not bored, are you? I hate to think what that would mean… for both of us. You've been cooped up here in this silly place too long. For someone like you, that can be deadly. You've always known you were special, haven't you? That someday—and it was always just around

the corner, wasn't it?—great things were going to happen, great things that didn't quite have a name yet. But they were there, as real as the velvet embrace of your favorite cape, the one with the silver chain that draws its curtainy wings together at your bosom. As real as the tall candles you love to light during storms, and which you drunkenly knocked over once, burning your right hand. No, don't cover up the scar, I'm sure no one's noticed it before now. You love those storms, don't you, with their chains of raindrops whipping against your windows. All that craving for noise and persecution. All that beautiful craziness! The storms: your eyes stared into their eyes, and into mine.

"But now you're in danger of losing all that, which is why I showed up tonight. You've got to get out of this tinsellated side-show. This is for hicks, this is small time. You can do better than this. I can take you places where the stories of tortuous romance and the storms never end. I'll take you there. Please, don't back away from me. There's nowhere to go and your eyes tell me you want the same things I do. If you're worried about the hardships of traveling to strange faraway places, don't! You're almost there now. Just fall into my arms, into my heart, into—There, that was easy, wasn't it?"

Afterward I retraced my steps down stairways and through corridors of scarlet darkness. "Goodnight, everybody!" I said to the girls in the reception room. Back out on the street, I paused and looked at that peculiar door again.

I could now see the logic of doing away with gratuitous barriers between one place and another, between those on the outside and those within. Bring down the walls! But watch out for escapees.

Actually she made only a single attempt. It wasn't serious, though. A drunk I passed on the sidewalk saw an arm shoot out at him from underneath my shirt, projecting chest-high at a perfect right angle to the rest of me. He staggered over, shook the hand with a jolly vigor, and then proceeded on his way. And I proceeded on mine, once I'd got her safely back inside her fabulous prison, a happy captive of my heart. We fled down the sidewalk. We breathed the cold of that winter night. We were one forever.

At the corner the amber traffic light had finally burst into a glorious red as my old flame and I approached the ultimate intersection of our flesh… as well as our dreams.

The Christmas Eves of Aunt Elise: A Tale of Possession in Old Grosse Pointe (2010 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

First published in *Grimoire* #, 1983

We pronounced her name with a distinct “Z” sound—*Remember, Jack, remember*—the way some people slur Missus into Mizzuz. It was at her home in Grosse Pointe that she insisted our family, both its wealthy and its unwealthy sides, celebrate each Christmas Eve in a style that exuded the traditional, the old-fashioned, the antique. Actually, Aunt Elise constituted the wealthy side of the family all on her own. Her husband had died many years before, leaving his wife a prosperous real estate business and no children. Not surprisingly, Aunt Elise undertook the management of the firm with admirable success, perpetuating our heirless uncle's family name on “for sale” signs planted on front lawns in three states. But what was Uncle's *first* name, a young nephew or niece sometimes wondered. Or, as it was more than once put by one of us children: “Where's *Uncle* Elise?” To which the rest of us answered in unison: “He's at his ease,” a response we learned from none other than our widowed aunt herself.

Aunt Elise was without husband or offspring of her own, true enough. But she loved all the ferment of big families, and every holiday season she possessed as much in blood relations as she did in her tangible and intangible assets and investments. Nevertheless, she was not the conspicuously consuming type of rich bitch. Her house was something of an Elizabethan country manor in style while remaining modest, even relatively miniature, in its mass. It fit very nicely—when it existed—into a claustrophobic cluster of trees on some corner acreage a few steps from Lake Shore Drive, profiling rather than facing the lake itself. A rather dull exterior of soot-gray stones somewhat camouflaged the old place in its woodland hideaway, until one caught sight of its diamond-paned windows and realized that a house in fact existed where before there seemed to be only shadowed vacancy.

Around Christmastime the many-faceted windows of my aunt's residence took on a candied glaze in the pink, blue, green, and other-colored lights strung about their perimeters. More often in the old days—*Remember them, Jack*—a thick December fog rolled off the not-yet-frozen lake and those kaleidoscopic windows would throw their spectrums into the softening haze. This, to my child's senses, was the image and atmosphere defining the winter holiday: a serene congregation of colors that for a time turned our everyday world into one where mysteries abounded. This was the celebration, this was the festival. Why did we leave it all behind us, leave it outside? Every Christmas Eve of my childhood, as I was guided up the winding front walk toward my aunt's house, a parent's hand in each of mine, I always stopped

short, pulling Mom and Dad back like a couple of runaway horses, and for a brief, futile moment refused to go inside.

After the first Christmas Eve I can recall—chronologically my fifth—I knew what happened inside the house, and year after year there was little change either in the substance or surface details of the program. For those from large families, this scene is a little too familiar to bother describing. Perhaps even lifelong orphans are jaded to it. Still, there are others for whom depictions of unusual uncles, loveable grandparents, and a common run of cousins will always be fresh and dear; those who delight in multiple generations of characters crowding the page, who are warmed by the feel of their paper flesh. I tell you they share this temper with my Aunt Elise, and her spirit is in them.

For the duration of these Christmas assemblies, my aunt always occupied the main room of her house. This room I never saw except as a fantasy of ornamentation, a hallucinatorium in holiday dress. Right now I can only hope to portray a few of its highlights. First of all holly, both fresh and artificial, hung down from wherever it was possible to hang—the frames of paintings, the stained-wood shelves of a thousand gewgaws, even the velvety embossed pattern of the wallpaper itself, intertwining with its swirls and flourishes, if memory serves. And from the fixtures above, including a chandelier delicately sugared with tiny Italian lights, down came gardens of mistletoe. The huge fireplace blazed with a festive inferno, and before its cinder-spitting hearth was a protective screen, at either end of which stood a pair of thick brass posts. And slipped over the crown of each post was a sock-puppet Santa, its mittens outstretched in readiness to give someone a tiny, angular hug.

In the corner of the main room, the one beside the front window, a plump evergreen was somewhere hidden beneath every imaginable type of dangling, roping, or blinking decoration, as well as being dolled up with silly bows in pastel shades, satiny bows lovingly tied by human hands. The same hands also did their work on the presents beneath the tree, and year after year these seemed, like everything else in the room, to be in exactly the same place, as if the gifts of last Christmas had never been opened, quickening in me the nightmarish sense of a ritual forever reenacted without hope of escape. (Somehow I am still possessed by this same feeling of entrapment.) My own present was always at the back of that horde of packages, almost against the wall behind the tree. It was tied up with a pale purple ribbon and covered with pale blue wrapping paper upon which little bears in infants' sleeping gowns dreamed of more pale blue presents which, instead of more bears, had little boys dreaming upon them. I spent much of a given Christmas Eve sitting near this gift of mine, mostly to find refuge from the others rather than to wonder at what was inside. It was always something in the way of underwear, nightwear, or socks, never the nameless marvel which I fervently hoped to receive from my obscenely well-heeled aunt. Nobody seemed to mind that I sat on the other side of the room from where most of them congregated to talk or sing carols to the music of an ancient organ, which Aunt Elise played with her back to her audience, and to me.

Slee—eep in heav—enly peace.

"That was very good," she said without turning around. As usual, the sound of her voice led you to expect that any moment she would clear her throat of some sticky stuff

which was clinging to its insides. Instead she switched off the electric organ, after which gesture some of the gathering, dismissed, left for other parts of the house.

"We didn't hear Old Jack singing with us," she said, turning to look across the room where I was seated in a large chair beside a fogged window. On that occasion I was about twenty or twenty-one, home from school for Christmas. I had drunk quite a bit of Aunt Elise's holiday punch, and felt like answering: "Who cares if you didn't hear Old Jack singing, you old bat?" But instead I simply stared her way, drunkenly taking in her visage for the family scrapbook of my memory: tight-haired head (like combed wires), calm eyes of someone in an old portrait (someone long gone), high cheekbones highly colored (less rosily than like a rash), and the prominent choppers of a horse charging out of nowhere in a dream. I had no worry about my future ability to remember these features, even though I had vowed this would be the last Christmas Eve I would view them. So I could afford to be tranquil in the face of Aunt Elise's taunts that evening. In any case, further confrontation between the two of us was aborted when some of the children began clamoring for one of their aunt's stories. "And this time a *true* story, Auntie. One that really happened."

"All right," she answered, adding that "maybe Old Jack would like to come over and sit with us."

"Too old for that, thank you. Besides, I can hear you just fine from—"

"Well," she began before I'd finished, "let me think a moment. There are so many, so *many*. Anywho, here's one of them. This happened before any of you were born, a few winters after I moved into this neighborhood with your

uncle. I don't know if you ever noticed, but a little ways down the street there's an empty lot where there should be, used to be, a house. You can see it from the front window over there," she said, pointing to the window beside my chair. I let my eyes follow her finger out that window and through the fog witnessed the empty lot of her story.

"There it once stood, a beautiful old house much bigger than this one. In that house lived a very old man who never went out and who never invited anyone to visit him, at least no one I ever noticed. And after the old man died, what do you think happened to the house?"

"It disappeared," answered some of the children, jumping the gun.

"In a way, I suppose it did disappear. Actually what happened was that some men came and tore the house down brick by brick. I think the old man who lived there must have been very mean to want that to happen to his house after he died."

"How do you know he wanted it?" I interjected, trying to spoil her assumption.

"What other sensible explanation is there?" Aunt Elise answered. "Anywho," she went on, "I think that the old man just couldn't stand the thought of anyone else living in the house and being happy there, because surely he wasn't. But maybe, just maybe, he had his house torn down for another reason," said Aunt Elise, drawing out these last words to suspenseful effect. The children sitting cross-legged before her now listened with a new intentness, while the crackling logs seemed to start up a little more noisily in the fireplace.

"Maybe by destroying his house, making it disappear, the old man thought he was taking it with him into the other

world. People who have lived alone for a very long time often think and do very strange things," she emphasized, though I'm sure no one except me thought to apply this final statement to the storyteller herself. (*Tell everything, Jack.*) She went on:

"Now what would lead a person to such conclusions about the old man, you may wonder? Did something strange happen with him and his house after both of them were gone? Well, the answer is yes, something did happen. And I'm going to tell you just what it was.

"One night—a foggy winter's night like this one, oh my little children—someone came walking down this exact street and paused at the property line of the house of the old man who was now dead. This someone was a young man whom many people had seen wandering around here off and on for some years. I myself, I tell you, once confronted him and asked him what business he had with us and with our homes, because that's what he seemed most interested in. Anywho, this young man called himself an an-tee-quarian, and he said he was very interested in old things, particularly old houses. And he had a very particular interest in the house of that strange old man. A number of times he had asked him if he could look around inside, but the old man always refused. Most of the time the house was dark as though no one was home, even if someone always was.

"So you can imagine the young man's bewilderment when on that winter's night what he saw was not a dark house where it seemed no one was inside, but a place all lit up with bright Christmas lights shining through the fog. Could this be the old man's house, decorated so nice and cheerful with these lights? Yes, it could, because there was

the old man himself standing at the window with a rather friendly look on his face. So, one more time, the young man thought he would try his luck and maybe get to see the inside of the old house. He rang the bell and the front door slowly opened wide. The old man didn't say anything, but merely stepped back so that his caller could come in. Finally the young antiquarian would be able to study the inside of the house to his heart's content. Along the way, in narrow halls and long-abandoned rooms, the old man stood silently beside his guest, smiling all the time."

"I can't imagine how you know this part of your *true* story," I interrupted.

"Aunt Elise *knows*," asserted one of my little cousins just to shut me up. And when my aunt cast a glance at me, it seemed for a moment that she really did know. Then she continued her true story.

"After the young man had looked all around the house, both men sat down in the deep comfortable chairs of the front parlor and talked a while. But it wasn't too long before that smile on the old man's face, that quiet little smile, began to bother his visitor in a peculiar way. At last the young man claimed he had to go, glancing down at the watch he had drawn from his pocket. And when he looked up again... the old man was gone. Naturally, this startled the young man, who jumped up from his chair and nervously checked the nearby rooms and hallways for his host, calling "Sir, sir," because he never found out the old man's name. And though he could have been in any number of different places, the owner of the house didn't seem to be anywhere that the young man investigated. So the antiquarian finally decided

just to leave without saying good-bye or thank you or anything like that.

“But he didn't get as far as the door when he stopped dead in his tracks because of what he saw through the front window. There seemed to be no street anymore, no street lamps or sidewalks, not even any houses, besides the one he was in, of course. There was only the fog and some horrible, tattered shapes wandering aimlessly within it. The young man could hear them crying. What was this place, and where had the old house taken him? He didn't know what to do except stare out the window. And when he saw the face reflected in the window, he thought for a second that the old man had returned and was standing behind him again, smiling his quiet smile.

“But then the young man realized that this was now his own face, and, like those terrible, ragged creatures lost in the fog, he too began to cry.

“After that night, no one around here ever saw the young man again. Well, did you like that story, children?”

I felt tired, more tired than I'd ever been in my life. I barely had the will or the strength to push myself out of the chair into which I'd sunk down so deep. How slowly I trudged past faces that seemed far off in the distance. Where was I going? Was I in want of another drink? Did I desire another dainty from the table spread with Christmas treats? What was it that was calling me away from that room?

No time seemed to have passed, but when I came to myself I was walking down a foggy street. The fog formed impenetrable white walls around me, narrow corridors leading nowhere and rooms without windows. I didn't walk very far before realizing I could go no farther. As it happened,

though, I did finally see something. What I saw was a cluster of Christmas lights, their colors beaming against the fog. But what could they have signified that they should seem so horrible to me? Why did this peaceful vision of hazy wonder, which had transported the imagination of my childhood self, now strike me with such terror? These were not the colors I had loved; this could not be the house. Yet it was, for there at the window stood its owner, and the sight of her thin smiling face for some reason was not right.

Then I remembered: Aunt Elise was long dead and her house, at the instruction of her will, had been dismantled brick by brick.

"Uncle Jack, wake up," urged young voices at close range, though technically, being an only child, I was not their uncle. More accurately, I was just an elder member of the family who had nodded off in his chair. It was Christmas Eve, and I had had a little too much to drink.

"We're gonna sing carols, Uncle Jack," said the voices. Then they went away.

I went away, too, retrieving my overcoat from the bedroom where it lay buried in a communal grave under innumerable other overcoats. Everyone else was singing songs to the strumming of guitars. (I liked their metallic timbre because it was in no way reminiscent of the rich, rotting vibrations of the church organ Aunt Elise played on Christmas Eves long past.) Foregoing all rituals of departure, I slipped quietly out the back door in the kitchen.

I left that Christmas Eve get-together as if I had an appointment to keep, one of long standing whose import I never knew or had forgotten. So many things I can remember from years gone by—and easily enough because I have

led such an uneventful and solitary existence—but I cannot remember what happened next that evening. My mind was not at its best, and the dream I had earlier must have carried over into one I had when I went to sleep at home, though I do not recall doing that either. The one thing I do remember, as if it happened while I was still awake and not dreaming, was standing before the door of a house that no longer existed, a door that opened in a slow, weighty sweep. Then a hand reached out and laid itself upon me. What horror I felt as I saw that great, gaping smile and heard the words: "Merry Christmas, Old Jack!"

Oh, how good it was to see the old boy when he came to me at last. He had grown old but never grew up. And finally I had him, him and his every thought, all the pretty pictures of his mind. Those weeping demons, souls forever lost, came out of the fog and took away his body. He was one of them now. But I have kept the best part, all his beautiful memories, all those lovely times we had—the children, the presents, the colors of those nights! Anywho, they are mine now. Tell us of those years, Old Jack, the years I have now taken from you—the years I can play with as I wish, like a child with his toys. Oh, how nice, how nice and lovely to be settled in a world where it's always dead with darkness and always alive with lights! And where it will always, forever after, be Christmas Eve.

The Christmas Eves of Aunt Elise: A Tale of Possession in Old Grosse Pointe (1989 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

First published in *Grimoire* #3, 1983

We pronounced her name with a distinct “Z” sound—*Remember, Jack, remember*—the way some people slur Missus into Mizzuz or for Christmas say Chrizmuzz. It was at her remarkable home in Grosse Pointe that she insisted our family, both its wealthy and its unwealthy side, celebrate each Christmas Eve in a style that exuded the traditional, the old-fashioned, the antique. Actually, Aunt Elise constituted the wealthy side of the family all on her own. Her husband had died many years before, leaving his wife with a prosperous real estate business but no children. Not surprisingly, Aunt Elise undertook the ownership and management of the firm with phenomenal success, perpetuating our heirless uncle's family name on for-sale signs planted in front lawns all over the state. But what was Uncle's *first* name, a young nephew or niece sometimes wondered. Or, as it was more than once put by one of us children: “Where's *Uncle* Elise?” To which the rest of us answered in unison: “He's at his ease,” a response we learned from none other than our widowed aunt herself.

Aunt Elise was without husband or offspring of her own, true enough. But she loved all the ferment of big families, and every holiday season she possessed as much in relations both young and no longer young as she did in her real estate returns, her tangible and intangible assets and investments, and her abundant hard cash. Her house was something of an Elizabethan country manor in style while remaining modest, even relatively miniature, in scale. It fit very nicely—when it existed—into a claustrophobic cluster of trees on some corner acreage a few steps uphill from Lake Shore Drive, profiling rather than facing the lake itself. A rather dull exterior of soot-gray stones somewhat camouflaged the old place in its woodland hideaway; until one caught sight of its diamond-paned windows—kept brilliant by the personal attention of Aunt Elise herself, no less—and one realized that a house in fact existed where before there seemed to be only shadowed emptiness.

Around Christmastime these many-faceted windows took on a candied glaze in the pink, blue, green, and other-colored lights strung about their perimeters. More often in the old days—*Remember them, Jack*—a thick December fog rolled off the not-yet-frozen lake and those kaleidoscopic windows would throw their spectrums into the softening mist. This, to my child's senses, was the image and atmosphere defining the winter holiday: a serene congregation of colors whose confused murmurings divulged to this world rumors of strange and solemn services that were concurrently taking place in another. This was the celebration, this the festival. Why did we leave it all behind us, leave it outside? And as I was guided up the winding front walk toward the house, a parent's hand in either of mine, I always

stopped short, pulling Mom and Dad back like a couple of runaway horses, and for a brief, futile moment refused to go inside.

After my first Christmas—chronologically my fifth—I knew what happened inside the house, and year after year there was little change either in the substance or surface details of the program. For those from large families, this scene is a little too familiar to bother describing. Perhaps even lifelong orphans are jaded to it. Still, there are others to whom depictions of the unusual uncles, the loveable grandparents, and the common run of cousins will always be fresh and dear; those who delight in multiple generations of characters crowding the page, who are warmed by the feel of their paper flesh. I tell you they share these desires with my Aunt Elise, and her spirit is in them.

She always occupied and dominated, for the duration of these Christmas Eves, the main room of her house. This room I never saw except as a fantasy of ornamentation, an hallucinatorium in holiday dress. Right now I can only hope to portray a few of its highlights. First of all holly, both fresh and artificial, hung down the walls from wherever it was possible to hang-from the frames of paintings, from the stained-wood shelves of a thousand gewgaws, even from the velvety embossed pattern of the wallpaper itself, intertwining with its vegetable swirls and flourishes, if my memory sees this accurately. And from fixtures above, including a chandelier delicately sugared with tiny Italian lights, down came gardens of mistletoe in mid-air. The huge fireplace blazed with a festive inferno, and before its cinder-spitting hearth was a protective screen, at either end of which stood a pair of thick brass posts; and over the crown of each post—

whose shape and design I never glimpsed—were two puppet Santas, slipped on like socks and drooping a little to one side, their mittens outstretched in readiness to give someone a tiny, angular hug. In a corner, the one beside the front window, a sturdy evergreen was somewhere hidden beneath every imaginable type of dangling, roping, or blinking decoration, as well as being dolled up with ridiculous satin bows in pastel shades, lovingly tied by human hands. The same hands did their work on the presents beneath the tree, and year after year these seemed, like everything else in the room, to be in exactly the same place, as if the gifts of last Christmas had never been opened, quickening in me the nightmarish sense of a ritual forever reenacted without hope of escape. (Somehow I am still possessed by this same feeling of entrapment, and after all these years.) My own present was always at the back of that horde of packages, almost against the wall behind the tree. It was tied up with a pale purple ribbon and covered with pale blue wrapping paper upon which little bears in infants' sleeping gowns dreamed of more pale blue presents which, instead of more bears, had little boys dreaming upon them. I spent much of a given Christmas Eve sitting near this gift of mine, mostly to find refuge from the others rather than to wonder at the thing inside. It was always something in the way of underwear, nightwear, or socks, never the nameless marvel which I fervently hoped to receive from my obscenely well-heeled aunt. Nobody seemed to mind that I sat on the other side of the room from where most of them congregated to talk or sing carols to the music of an ancient organ, which Aunt Elise played with her back to her audience, and to me.

Slee—eep in heav—enly peace.

“That was very good,” she said without turning around. As usual the sound of her voice led you to expect that any moment she would clear her throat of some sticky stuff which was clinging to its insides. Instead she switched off the electric organ, after which gesture some of the gathering, dismissed, left for other parts of the house.

“We didn't hear Old Jack singing with us,” she said, turning to look across the room where I was seated in a large chair beside a fogged window. On that occasion I was about twenty or twenty-one, home from school for Christmas. I had drunk quite a bit of Aunt Elise's holiday punch, and felt like answering: “Who cares if you didn't hear Old Jack singing, you old bat?” But instead I simply stared her way, drunkenly taking in her features, with prejudice, for the family scrapbook of my memory: tight-haired head (like combed wires), calm eyes of someone in an old portrait (someone long gone), high cheekbones highly colored (less rosily than like a rash), and the prominent choppers of a horse charging out of nowhere in a dream. I had no worry about my future ability to recall these features, even though I had secretly vowed this would be the last Christmas Eve I would view them. So I could afford to be tranquil in the face of Aunt Elise's taunts that evening. Anyway, further confrontation between the two of us was aborted when some of the children began clamoring for one of their aunt's stories. “And this time a true story, Auntie. One that really happened.”

“All right,” she answered, adding that “maybe Old Jack would like to come over and sit with us.”

“Too old for that, thank you. Besides, I can hear you just fine from—”

“Well,” she began before I'd finished, “let me think a moment. There are so many, so *many*. Anywho, here's one of them. This happened before any of you were born, a few winters after I moved into this neighborhood with your uncle. I don't know if you ever noticed, but a little ways down the street there's an empty lot where there should be, used to be, a house. You can see it from the front window over there,” she said, pointing to the window beside my chair. I let my eyes follow her finger out that window and, through the fog, I witnessed the empty lot of her story.

“There was once a house on that lot, a beautiful old house with more floors and more windows than this one, more of everything. The house was lived in by a very old man who never went out and who never invited anyone to visit him, at least no one that I ever noticed. And after the old man died, what do you think happened to the house?”

“It disappeared,” answered some of the children, jumping the gun.

“In a way, I suppose it did disappear. Actually what happened was that some men came and tore the house down brick by brick, shingle by shingle. I think the old man who lived there must have been very mean to want that to happen to his house after he died.”

“How do you know he wanted it?” I interjected, trying to spoil her assumption.

“What other sensible explanation is there?” Aunt Elise answered. “Anywho,” she went on, “I think that the old man just couldn't stand the thought of anyone else living in the house and being happy there, because surely he wasn't. But maybe there was also another reason,” said Aunt Elise, drawing out these last words and torturing them at length with

her muddled vocal system. The children sitting on the carpet before her listened with a new intentness, while the blazing logs seemed to start up a little more noisily in the fireplace.

"Maybe by destroying his house, making it disappear, the old man thought he was taking it with him into the other world. People who have lived alone for a very long time often think and do very strange things," she emphasized, though I'm sure no one except me thought to apply this final statement to the storyteller herself. *Tell everything, Jack*. She went on:

"Now what would lead a person to such conclusions about the old man, you may wonder? Did something strange happen with him and his house, after both of them were gone? I'll tell you, because one night, yes, something did happen.

"One night—a foggy winter's night like this one, oh my little children—someone came walking down this exact street and paused at the property line of the house of the old man who was now dead. This someone was a young man whom many people had seen wandering around here off and on for some years. I myself, I tell you, once confronted him and asked him what business he had with us and with our homes, because that's what he seemed most interested in. Anywho, this young man called himself an an-tee-quarian, and he said he was very interested in old things, particularly old houses. And he had a very particular interest in that strange old house of the old man. A number of times he had asked if he could look around inside, but the old man always refused. Most of the time the house was dark and seemed as if no one was home, even though someone always was.

“Imagine the young man's surprise, then, when he now saw not a dark empty place, no, but a place of bright Christmas lights shining all fuzzy through the fog. Could this be the old man's house? Lit up with these lights? Yes, it could, because there was the old man himself standing at the window with a rather friendly look on his face. At least for him it was. So, one last time, the young man thought he would try his luck with the old house. He rang the bell and the front door slowly opened wide. The old man didn't say anything, but merely stepped back and allowed the other to enter. Finally the young antiquarian would be able to study the inside of the house to his heart's content. Along the way, in narrow halls and long-abandoned rooms, the old man stood silently beside his guest, smiling all the time.”

“I can't imagine how you know this part of your *true* story, Aunt Elise,” I interrupted.

“Aunt Elise knows,” asserted one of my little cousins just to shut me up, saving my aunt the trouble. She went on:

“After the young man had looked all around the house, both men sat down in the deep comfortable chairs of the front parlor and talked a while about the house. But it wasn't too long before that smile on the old man's face, that quiet little smile, began to bother his visitor in a peculiar way. At last the young man claimed he had to go, glancing down at the watch he had drawn from his pocket. And when he looked up again... the old man was gone. This startled the young man for a moment. He checked the nearby rooms and hallways for his host, calling “sir, sir” because he never found out the old man's name. And though he could have been in a dozen different places, the owner of the house didn't seem to be anywhere in particular that the young man

could see. So the antiquarian decided just to leave without saying goodbye or thank you or anything like that.

“But he didn't get as far as the front door when he stopped dead in his tracks because of what he saw through the front window. There seemed to be no street anymore, no street lamps or sidewalks, not even any houses, besides the one he was in, of course. There was only the fog and some horrible, tattered shapes wandering aimlessly within it. The young man could hear them crying. What was this place, and where had the old house taken him? He didn't know what to do except stare out the window. And when he saw the face reflected in the window, he thought for a second that the old man had returned and was standing behind him again, smiling his quiet smile.

“But then the young man realized that this was now his own face, and, like those terrible, ragged creatures lost in the fog, he too began to cry.

“After that night, no one around here ever saw the young man again, just as no one has ever seen the house that was torn down. At least no one has yet!

“Well, did you like that story, children?”

I felt tired, more tired than I'd ever been in my life. I barely had the strength, it seemed, to push myself out of the chair into which I'd sunk down so deep. I brushed up against bodies and shuffled slowly under the stares of remote faces. Where was I going? Was I in want of another drink? Did I have to find a bathroom for my old body? No, none of these served as my motive.

It could almost have been hours later that I was walking down a foggy street. The fog formed impenetrable white walls around me, narrow corridors leading nowhere and

rooms without windows. I didn't walk very far before realizing I could go no farther.

But finally I did see something. What I saw was simply a cluster of Christmas lights, innocent colors beaming against the fog. But what could they have signified that they should seem so horrible to me? Why did this peaceful vision of inaccessible and hazy wonder, which possessed such marvelous appeal in my childhood, now strike me with all the terror of the impossible? The colors bled into the fog and were sopped up as if by a horrible gauze which drank the blood of rainbows. These were not the colors I had loved, this could not be the house. But it was, for there at the window stood its owner, and the sight of her thin smiling face crippled my body and my brain.

Then I remembered: Aunt Elise was dead now and her house, at the instruction of her will, had been dismantled brick by brick, shingle by shingle.

“Uncle Jack, wake up,” urged young voices at close range, though technically, being an only child, I was not their uncle. More accurately, I was just a friendly elder member of the family who'd nodded off in a chair. It was Christmas Eve, and as usual I had had a little too much to drink.

“We're gonna sing carols, Uncle Jack,” said the voices again. Then they went away.

I went away too, retrieving my overcoat from the bedroom where it lay buried in a communal grave under innumerable other overcoats. Everyone else was singing songs to the strumming of guitars in the living room. (I liked their bland music infinitely better than the rich, rotting vibrations of Aunt Elise's cathedralesque keyboard of Christmas

Eves past.) Foregoing all rituals of departure, I slipped quietly out the back door in the kitchen.

Though I do not remember very much about it, I must have gone to Grosse Pointe, to the empty land on which my aunt's house once stood. So many things I can remember so clearly from long ago—and at my age—but not this thing. *Leave out nothing, Jack. Remember*. I must have gone to Grosse Pointe, to the open land on which my aunt's house once stood. But I do not remember what it was like that Christmas Eve. *Remember, Jack*. How thick the fog must have been, if there was fog and not merely a slow descent of snow, or nothing. Would those old lights be there? *You shall remember*.

But I must have gone to Grosse Pointe that night, I must have gone there. Because what I do remember is this: standing before the door of a house which no longer existed. And then seeing that door begin to open in a slow, monumental sweep, receding with all the ponderous labor of a clock's barely budging hands. Another hand also moved with a monstrous languor, as it reached out and laid itself upon me. Then her face looked into mine, and the last thing I remember is that great, gaping smile, and the words: "Merry Christmas, Old Jack!"

Oh, I'll never forget the look on his face when I said these words. I had him at last, him and his every thought, all the pretty pictures of his mind. Those weeping demons, those souls forever-lost to happiness, came out of the fog and took away his body. He was one of them now, crying like a baby! But I have kept the best part, all his beautiful memories, all those lovely times we had—the children, the presents, the colors of those nights! Anywho, they are mine now. Tell us of those years, Old Jack, the years that were

never yours. They were always mine, and now I have them to play with like toys according to my will. Oh, how nice, how nice and lovely to have my little home. How nice and lovely to live in a land where it's always dead with darkness, and where it's always alive with lights! And where it will always, forever after, be just like Christmas Eve.

The Order of Illusion (2011 Noctuary Version)

First published in *Fantasy And Terror #4*, 1984.

It seemed to him that the old mysteries had been made for another universe, and not the one he came to know. Yet there was no doubt that they had once deeply impressed him. Intoxicated by their wonder, by raw wonder itself, he might never have turned away from the golden blade held aloft by crimson hands, from the mask with seven eyes, the idol of moons, from the ceremony called the Night of the Night, along with other rites of illumination and all the ageless doctrines which derived from their frenzies. How was it they failed him? When was the first moment he found himself growing impatient with their music and their gyrations, when the first moment he witnessed these mysteries and descended into another kind of wonder?

Before his disillusion was discovered, he walked out on his old sect. He did not waste any time, however, in casting about for a new one. Unfortunately the same problems arose with each of them: they all, in his view, were nullified by their own profundity and by a collection of mysteries that failed to break the surface of the bottomless soul, failed to place themselves at eye level with things. These mysteries thus condemned all that lay outside of them to triviality, whether deserving of this fate or not. Injustice was their essence and their power. Had these routines of enlightenment actually been intended for a universe not undermined by

mockery and confusion? But to bother even with the dream of such a place was useless, especially when he could conceive a plan more to his purpose. This entailed nothing less than the invention of a cult, a solitary one to be sure, better suited to his profane vision.

He set out to locate a site of worship, a place abandoned, old, isolated, and decayed. Actually there were many such places to choose from, and, by a completely arbitrary means of selection, he soon managed to settle on one of them. This numinous structure—bashed in roof and battered walls—he cluttered with the fetishes of his new creed. These consisted of anything he could find which had a divine aura of disuse, hopelessness, disintegration, of grotesque imbecility and senselessness. Dolls with broken faces he put on display in corners and upon crumbling pedestals. Thin, lifeless trees he dug up whole from their natural graves and transplanted into the cracked tiles of the floor's mosaic. Then he hung lamps of thick green glass by corroded chains from the ceiling, and the withered branches of the trees were bathed in hues of mold—as were the faces of the dolls and those of various mummified creatures, including two human abortions which were set floating in jars at opposite ends of an altar draped with rags. His vestments were also of rags, their frayed edges fluttering like dead leaves about to fall. Standing before the altar, he raised his arms over something that smoldered, which was his own dried excrement upon a tarnished plate. He glanced about at the defunct forest of which he was king, at the brittle twisting branches (some of which were adorned with hanging dolls and other things), at all the various objects of refuse he had added to his collection. And finally he widened his mouth to speak, and he said... noth-

ing. So distracted was he with a gruesome contentment that his old wonder had been ravaged and his hunger for mockery fulfilled.

But this contentment did not last; how could it? Illusion throws its invisible shimmer over all things, no matter what level of debasement they have struggled to win. Whatever may appear, sooner or later, will appear in greatness. Thus, gradually, the pathetic, lusterless world he had made, and labored to make low, had rebelliously elevated itself beyond its surface of decrepitude and assumed a kind of grandeur in his eyes. The naked limbs of what had once been trees and now were empty objects, hollow abstractions mocked by the sarcastic verdure of the green lamps, underwent transfiguration to inherit the suppleness of all symbols and the dignity of a dream. Each of the disfigured dolls, vile and insane mimics of the human nightmare, gave up their evil and revealed themselves as the protectors of countless inexpressible mysteries and myriad secret enchantments. And the precocious corpses upon the altar no longer drifted about pointlessly, embalmed in their wombs of foggy glass, but hovered serenely in becalmed fathoms of infinite wonder.

His effort to strip away the finery of objects and events, and to exist only in the balm of desolation, was a failure. The experiment had only resulted in the discovery of a deeper stratum of preciousness in things. And having revealed this substratum, his eyes began to attack its treasures with all their savage wondering. Everything became newly subject to a mockery that was not of his own making, and to an onslaught of confusion that threatened to violate his precious world of death and dolls. But was there perhaps a more profound source of mockery and confusion that could be excav-

ated beneath the deceptive wealth which he had so quickly exhausted? If there was, he did not possess the ambition, at this point, to seek it out. Dropping to the shattered mosaic of the floor, collapsing under the now lovely doll-hung trees, he lay abject in ragged robes of despair throughout a full day and late into the night.

But toward the latest hour of evening he was disturbed by distant sounds. He had been away from his old sect so long that at first he did not recognize the peculiar clamor of the ceremony called the Night of the Night. When he walked out into the cold air outside his solitary temple, he saw the gyration of shadows upon the summit of the hills. How could they persist in their madness, he wondered? Nevertheless, for reasons beyond explanation, he joined them.

And they welcomed him, for they could see the ordeals he had undergone, the powers he had gained. He, on the other hand, felt nothing; but he easily devoured all the honors held out to him. These were the only sustenance left which satisfied his hunger for mockery. And when they presented him with the accoutrements of high priest, he could not suppress a smile as he gazed upon the wide, dead sky.

Now his are the crimson hands which hold aloft the golden blade, his is the face behind the mask with seven eyes. And he is the one who stands in shining robes before the massive idol of moons, trembling the while with wonder.

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found source of mockery and confusion that could be excavated beneath the deceptive wealth which he had so quickly exhausted? If there was, he did not possess the ambition, at this point, to seek it out. Dropping to the shattered mosaic of the floor, collapsing under the now lovely doll-hung trees, he lay abject in ragged robes of despair throughout a full day and late into the night.

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The Consolations Of Horror (Unknown Version)

First published in *Dark Horizons* #27, 1984

Darkness, We Welcome and Embrace You

Horror, at least in its artistic presentations, can be a comfort. And, like any agent of enlightenment, it may even confer—if briefly—a sense of power, wisdom, and transcendence, especially if the conferee is a willing one with a true feeling for ancient mysteries and a true fear of the skulduggery which a willing heart usually senses in the unknown.

Clearly we (just the willing conferees, remember) want to know the worst, both about ourselves and the world. The oldest, possibly the only theme is that of forbidden knowledge. And no forbidden knowledge ever consoled its possessor. (Which is probably why it's forbidden.) At best it is one of the more sardonic gifts bestowed upon the individual (for knowledge of the forbidden is first and foremost an individual ordeal). It is particularly forbidden because the mere possibility of such knowledge introduces a monstrous and perverse temptation to trade the quiet pleasures of mundane existence for the bright lights of alienage, doom, and, in some rare cases, eternal damnation.

So we not only wish to know the worst, but to experience it as well.

Hence that arena of artificial experience, supposedly of the worst kind—the horror story—where gruesome conspir-

acies may be trumped up to our soul's satisfaction, where the deck is stacked with shivers, shocks, and dismembered hands for every player; and, most importantly, where one, at a safe distance, can come to grips (after a fashion) with death, pain, and loss in the, quote, real world, unquote.

But does it ever work the way we would like it to?

A Test Case

I am watching Night of the Living Dead. I see the ranks of the deceased reanimated by a double-edged marvel of the modern age (atomic radiation, I think. Or is it some wonder chemical which found its way into the water supply? And does this detail even matter?) I see a group of average, almost documentary types holed up in a house, fighting off wave after wave of hungry ghouls. I see the group hopelessly losing their ground and succumb each one of them to the same disease as their sleepwalking attackers: A husband tries to eat his wife (or is it mother tries to eat child?), a daughter stabs her father with a gardener's trowel (or perhaps brother stabs sister with a bricklayer's trowel). In any case, they all die, and horribly. This is the important thing.

When the movie is over, I am invigorated by the sense of having rung the ear-shattering changes of harrowing horror; I've got another bad one under my belt that will serve to bolster my nerves for whatever shocking days and nights are to come; I have, in a phrase, an expanded capacity for fear. I can really take it!

At the movies, that is.

The fearful truth is that all of the above brutalities can be “taken” only too well. And then, at some point, one starts to adopt unnatural strategies to ward off not the bogey but the

sandman. Talking to the characters in a horror film, for instance: Hi, Mr. Decomposing Corpse lapping up a lump of sticky entrails, Hi! But even this tactic loses its charm after a while, especially if you're watching some “shocker” by yourself and lack an accomplice to share your latest stage of jadedness and immunity to primitive fright. (At the movies, I mean. Otherwise you're the same old vulnerable self.)

So after a devoted horror fan is stuffed to the gills, thoroughly sated and consequently bored—what does he (the he's traditionally out-number the she's here) do next? Haunt the emergency rooms of hospitals or the local morgues? Keep an eye out for bloody mishaps on the freeway? Become a war correspondent? But now the issue has been blatantly shifted to a completely different plane—from movies to life—and clearly it doesn't belong there.

The one remedy for the horror addict's problem seems this: that if the old measure of medicine is just not strong enough—increase the dosage! (This pharmaceutical parallel is ancient but apt.) And thus we have the well-known and very crude basis for the horror film's history of ever-escalating scare tactics. Have you already seen such old classics as Werewolf of London too many times? Sample one of its gore-enriched, yet infinitely inferior versions of the early 1980s. Of course the relief is only temporary; one's tolerance to the drug tends to increase. And looking down that long open road there appears to be no ultimate drugstore in sight, no final pharmacy where the horror hunger can be glutted on a sufficiently enormous dose, where the once insatiable addict may, at last, be laden with all the demonic dope there is, collapse with sated obesity into the shadows, and quietly gasp: “enough.” The empty pit of boredom is ever renewing itself,

while horror films become less tantalizing to the marginally sadistic moviegoer.

And what is the common rationale for justifying what would otherwise be considered a just barely frustrated case of sadomasochism? Now we remember: to present us with horrors inside the theater (or the books, let's not forget those) and thereby help us to assimilate the horrors on the outside, and also to ready us for the Big One. This does sound reasonable, it sounds right and rational. But none of this has anything to do with these three R's. We are in the great forest of fear, where you can't fight real experiences of the worst with fake ones (no matter how well synchronized a symbolic correspondence they may have). When is the last time you heard of someone screaming himself awake from a nightmare, only to shrug it off with: “Yeah, but I've seen worse at the movies” (or read worse in the books; we'll get to them)? Nothing is worse than that which happens personally to a person. And though a bad dream may momentarily register quite high on the fright meter, it is, realistically speaking, one of the less enduring, smaller time terrors a person is up against. Try drawing solace from your half-dozen viewings of the Texas Chain-Saw Massacre when they're prepping you for brain surgery.

In all truth, frequenters of horror films are a jumpier, more casually hysterical class of person than most. We need the most reassurance that we can take it as well as anyone, and we tend to be the most complacent in thinking that seventeen straight nights of supernatural-psycho films is good for the nerves and will give us a special power which non-horror fanatics don't have. After all, this is supposed to be a

major psychological selling point of the horror racket, the first among its consolations.

It is undoubtedly the first consolation, but it's also a false one.

Interlude: So Long, Consolations Of Mayhem

Perhaps it was a mistake selecting Night of the Living Dead to illustrate the consolations of horror. As a delegate from Horror-land this film is admirably incorruptible, oozing integrity. It hasn't sold out to the kindergarten moral codes of most "modern horror" movies and it has no particular message to deliver: its only news is nightmare. For pure brain-chomping, nerve-chewing, sight-cursing insanity, this is a very effective work, at least the first couple of times or so. It neither tries nor pretends to be anything beyond that. (And as we have already found, nothing exists beyond that anyway, except more and more of that.) But the big trouble is that sometimes we forget how much more can be done in horror movies (books too!) than that. We sometimes forget that supernatural stories—and this is a very good time to boot non-supernatural ones right off the train: psycho, suspense, and the like—are capable of all the functions and feelings of real stories. For the supernatural can serve as a trusty vehicle for careening into realms where the Strange and the Familiar charge each other with the opposing poles of their passion. The Haunting, for example. Besides being the greatest haunted house film ever made, it is also a great haunted human one. In it the ancient spirit of mortal tragedy passes easily through walls dividing the mysteries of the mundane world from those of the extra-mundane. And this supertragic specter never comes to rest in either one of

these worlds; it never lingers long enough to give us forbidden knowledge of either the stars or ourselves, or anything else for that matter. To what extent may the “derangement of Hill House” (Dr. Markway's diagnosis) be blamed on the derangement of the people who were, are, and probably will be in it? And vice versa of course. Is there something wrong with that spiral staircase in the library or just with the clumsy persons who try to climb it? The only safe bet is that something is wrong, wherever the wrongness lies... and lies and lies. Our poor quartet of spook-chasers—Dr. Markway, Theo, Luke, and Eleanor—are not only helpless to untie themselves from entangling puppet strings; they can't even find the knots!

The ghosts at Hill House always remain unseen, except in their effects: savagely pummelling enormous oak doors, bending them like cardboard; writing assonant messages on walls (“Help Eleanor come home”) with an unspecified substance (“Chalk,” says Luke. “Or something like chalk,” corrects Markway); and in general giving the place a very bad feeling. We're not even sure who the ghosts are, or rather were. The pious and demented Hugh Crane, who built Hill House? His spinster daughter Abigail, who wasted away in Hill House? Her neglectful companion, who hung herself in Hill House? None of them emerges as a discrete, clearly definable haunter of the old mansion. Instead we have an undefined presence which seems a sort of melting pot of deranged forces from the past, an anti-America where the very poorest in spirit settle and stagnate and lose themselves in a massive and insane spectral body.

Easier to identify are the personal specters of the living, at least for the viewer. But the characters in the film are too

busy with outside things to look inside one another's houses, or even their own. Dr. Markway doesn't acknowledge Eleanor's spooks. (She loves him, hopelessly.) Eleanor can't see Theo's spooks (she's lesbian) and Theo avoids dwelling on her own. (“And what are you afraid of, Theo?” asks Eleanor. “Of knowing what I really want,” she replies, somewhat uncandidly.) Best of all, though, is Luke, who doesn't think there even are any spooks, until near the end of the film when this affable fun-seeker gains an excruciating sense of the alienation, perversity, and strangeness of the world around him. “It should be burned to the ground,” he says of the high-priced house he is to inherit, “and the earth sown with salt.” This quasi-biblical quote indicates that more than a few doors have been kicked down in Luke's private passageways. He knows now! Poor Eleanor, of course, has been claimed by the house as one of its lonely, faceless citizens of eternity. It is her voice that gets to deliver the reverberant last lines of the film: “Hill House has stood for eighty years and will probably stand for eighty more … and we who walk there, walk alone.” With these words the viewer glimpses a realm of unimaginable pain and horror, an unfathomable region of aching Gothic turmoil, a weird nevermoresville.

The experience is extremely disconsoling but nonetheless exhilarating.

But for a movie to convey such intense feeling for the supernatural is rare. (This one of course is a scrupulously faithful adaptation of Shirley Jackson's unarguably excellent novel.) The thing that is quite common, especially with fiction, is the phenomenon that produced the single-sentence paragraph above; in other words—the horror story's paradox of entertainment. The thumping heart of the question,

though, is what really entertains us? In opposition, that is, to what we only imagine entertains us. Entertainment, whatever we imagine its real source, is rightly regarded as its own justification, and this seems to be one of the unassailable consolations of horror. But is it? (This won't take long.)

Another Test Case

We are reading—in a quiet, cozy room, it goes without saying—one of M.R. James' powerful ghost stories. It is "Count Magnus," in which a curious scholar gains knowledge he didn't even know was forbidden and suffers the resultant doom at the hands of the count and his betentacled companion. The story actually ends before we have a chance to witness its fabulous coup de grace, but we know that a sucked-off face is in store for our scholar. Meanwhile we sit on the sidelines (sipping a warm drink, probably) as the doomed academic meets a fate worse than any we'll ever know. At least we think it's worse, we hope it is... deep, deep in the subcellars of our minds we pray: "Please don't let anything even like that happen to me! Not to me. Let it always be the other guy and I'll read about him, even tremble for him a little. Besides, I'm having so much fun, it can't be all that terrible. For him, that is. For me it would be unbearable. See how shaky and excitable I get just reading about it. So please let it always be the other guy."

But it can't always be the other guy, for in the long run we're all, each of us, the other guy.

Of course in the short run it's one of life's minor ecstasies—an undoubted entertainment—to read about a world in which the very worst doom takes place in a restricted area we would never ever wander into and befalls somebody else.

And this is the run in which all stories are read, as well as written. (If something with eyes like two runny eggs were after your carcass, would you sit down and write a story about it?) It's another world, the short run; it's a world where horror really is a true consolation. But it's no compliment to Dr. James or to ourselves as readers to put too much stock in ghost stories as a consolation for our mortality, our vulnerability to real-life terrors. As consolations go, this happens to be a pretty low-grade one—demented complacency posing as beatitude.

So our second consolation lives on borrowed time at best. And in the long-run—where no mere tale can do you much good—is delusory.

(Perhaps the stories of H.P. Lovecraft offer a more threatening and admirable role to those of us devoted to doom. In Lovecraft's work doom is not restricted to eccentric characters in eccentric situations. It begins there but ultimately expands to violate the safety zone of the reader (and the non-reader for that matter, though the latter remains innocent of Lovecraft's forbidden knowledge). M.R. James' are cautionary tales, lessons in how to stay out of spectral trouble and how nice and safe it feels to do so. But within the cosmic boundaries of Lovecraft's universe, which many would call the universe itself, we are already in trouble, and feeling safe is out of the question for anyone with a few brains and a chance access to the manuscripts of Albert Wilmarth, Nathaniel Wingate Peaslee, or Prof. Angell's nephew. These isolated narrators take us with them into their doom, which is the world's. (No one ever gives a hoot what happens to Lovecraft's characters as individuals). If we knew what they know about the world and about our alarmingly tentative

place in it, our brains would indeed reel with the revelation. And if we found out what Arthur Jermyn found out about ourselves and our humble origins in a mere madness of biology, we would do as he did with a few gallons of gasoline and a merciful match. Of course Lovecraft insists on telling us things it does no good to know: things that can't help us or protect us or even prepare us for the awful and inevitable apocalypse to come.The only comfort is to accept it, live in it, and sigh yourself into the balm of living oblivion. If you can only maintain this constant sense of doom, you may be spared the pain of foolish hopes and their impending demolishment.

But we can't maintain it: only a saint of doom could. Hope leaks into our lives by way of spreading cracks we always meant to repair but never got around to. Oddly enough, when the cracks yawn their widest, and the promised deluge comes at last, it is not hope at all that finally breaks through and drowns us.

Interlude: See You Later, Consolations Of Horror

So when a fictional state of absolute doom no longer offers us possibilities of comfort—what's left? Well, another stock role casts one not as the victim of a horror story but as the villain in it. That is, we get to be the monster for a change. To a certain extent this is supposed to happen when we walk onto those resounding floorboards behind the Gothic footlights. It's traditional to identify with and feel sorry for the vampire or the werewolf in their ultimate moment of weakness, a time when they're most human. Sometimes, though, it seems as if there's much fun to be had playing a vampire or werewolf at the height of each's monstrous,

people-maiming power. To play them in our hearts, I mean. After all, it would be kind of great to wake up at dusk every day and cruise around in the shadows and fly on batwings through the night, stare strange girls in the eye and have them under your power. Not bad for someone who's supposed to be dead. Or rather, for someone who can't die and whose soul is not his own; for someone who—no matter how seemingly suave—is doomed to ride eternity with a single and highly embarrassing obsession, the most debased junkie immortalized. As we might guess, junkies never really have a good time.

But maybe you could make it as a werewolf. For most of a given month you're just like anybody else. Then for a few days you can take a vacation from your puny human self and spill the blood of puny human others. Then you return to your original clothes size and no one is any the wiser... until next month rolls around and you've got to do the whole thing again, month after month, over and over. Still, the werewolf's lifestyle might not be so bad, as long as you don't get caught killing someone you hate, which is expected of a werewolf, or someone you love, which is really expected. Neither should we forget that there might be some guilt involved and, yes, bad dreams.

Vampirism and lycanthrophy do have their drawbacks, anyone would admit that. But there would also be some memorable moments too, moments humans rarely if ever have: feeling your primal self at one with the inhuman forces around you, fearless in the face of night and nature and solitude and all those things from which mere people have much to fear. There you are under the moon—a raging storm in human form. And you'll always be like that, forever

if you're careful. Being a human being is a dead end anyway. It would seem that supernatural sociopaths have more possibilities open to them. So wouldn't it be great to be one? What I mean, of course, is: is it a consolation of horror fiction to let us be one for a little while? Yeah, it really is; the attractions of this life are sometimes irresistible. But are we missing some point if we only see the glamour and ignore the drudgery in the existence of these freespirited nyctophiles? Well, are we?

The Last Test

Test cancelled. The consolation is patently a trick one, done with invisible writing, mirrors and camera magic.

Substitute consolation: "The Fall of the House of Usher, or Doom Revisited"

Did you ever wonder how a Gothic story like this can be so great without enlisting the reader's care for its characters' doom? Plenty of horrible events and concepts are woven together; the narrator and his friend Roderick experience a fair amount of FEAR (once in all caps, as shown). But unlike a horror story whose effect depends on reader sympathy with its fictional victims, this one doesn't want us to get involved with the characters in that way. Our fear does not derive from theirs. Though Roderick, his sister, and the visiting narrator are fascinating companions, they do not burden us with their individual catastrophes. Are we sad for Roderick's and his sister's terrible fate? No. Are we happy the narrator makes a safe flight from the sinking house? Not particularly. Then why get upset about this calamity which takes

place in the backwoods, miles from the nearest town and everyday human concerns?

In this masterpiece individuals are not the issue. Everywhere in Poe's literary universe (Lovecraft's too) the individual is horribly and comfortingly irrelevant. During the reading of The Fall of the House of Usher we don't look over any particular character's shoulder but we have our attention distributed godwise into every corner of a foul factory which manufactures only one product: total and inescapable doom. Whether a given proper noun escapes or is caught on a given occasion is beside the point. This is a world created with built-in obsolesence and to appreciate fully this down-running cosmos one must take the perspective of its creator, which is all perspectives without getting sidetracked into a single one. Therefore we as readers are the House of Usher (both family and structure), we are the fungi clustering across its walls and the violent storm over its ancient head; we sink with the Ushers and get away with the narrator. In brief, we play all the roles. And the consolation in this is that we are supremely removed from the maddeningly tragic viewpoint of the human.

Of course, when the story is over we must fall from our god's perch and sink back into human-ness, which is perhaps what the Ushers and their house are doing. This is always a problem for would-be gods! We can't maintain for very long a godlike point of view. Wouldn't it be great if we could; if life could be lived outside the agony of the individual? But we are always doomed and redoomed to become involved with our own lives, which is the only life there is, and godlikeness has nothing at all to do with it.

But still, wouldn't it be great...

Darkness, we welcome and embrace you

At this point it may seem that the consolations of horror are not what we thought they were, that all this time we've been keeping company with illusions. Well, we have. And we'll continue to do so, continue to seek the appalling scene which short-circuits our brain, continue to sit in our numb coziness with a book of terror in our lap like a cataleptic predator, and continue to draw smug solace, if only for the space of a story, from a world made snug and simple by absolute hopelessness and doom. There consolations are still effective, even if they don't work as well as we would prefer them to. But they are only effective, like most things of value in art or life, as illusions. And there's no point attributing to them powers of therapy or salvation they don't and can't have. There are enough disappointments in the world without adding that one.

Perhaps, though, our illusion of consolation could be enhanced by acquiring a better sense of what we are being consoled by. What, in fact, is a horror story? And what does it do? First the latter.

The horror story does the work of a certain kind of dream we all know. Sometimes it does this so well that even the most irrational and unlikely subject matter can infect the reader with a sense of realism beyond the realistic, a trick usually not seen outside the vaudeville of sleep. When was the last time you failed to be fooled by a nightmare, didn't suspend disbelief because it wasn't sufficiently true-to-life? The horror story is only true to dreams, especially those which involve us in mysterious ordeals, the passing of

secrets, the passages of forbidden knowledge, and, in more ways than two, the spilling of guts.

What distinguishes horror from other kinds of stories is the exclusive devotion of their practitioners, their true practitioners and not the fakes and opportunists, to self-consciously imagining and isolating the most demonic aspects and episodes of human existence, undiminished by any consolation whatsoever.

For here no consolation on earth is sufficient to the horrors it will struggle in vain to make bearable.

Are horror stories truer than other stories? They may be, but not necessarily. They are limited to depicting conditions of extraordinary suffering, and while this is not the only game on the block, I don't think these depictions are essentially lies. After all, what simple fictional horror—no matter how grossly magnified—can ever hold a candle to the complex mesh of misery and disenchantment which is merely the human routine? Of course the fundamental horror of existence is not always apparent to us, its constantly menaced but unwary existers. But in true horror stories we can see it even in the dark. All eternal hopes, optimistic outs, and ultimate redemptions are cleared away, and for a little while we can pretend to stare the very worst right in its rotting face.

Why, though? Why?

Just to do it, that's all. Just to see how much unmitigated weirdness, sorrow, desolation, and cosmic anxiety the human heart can take and still have enough heart left over to translate these agonies into artistic forms: James' stained-glass monstrosities, Lovecraft's narrow-passaged blasphemies, Poe's symphonic paranoia. As in any satisfying relationship, the creator of horror and its consumer approach

oneness with each other. In other words, you get the horrors you deserve, those you can understand. For contrary to conventional wisdom, you can not be frightened by what you don't understand.

This, then, is the ultimate, that is only, consolation: simply that someone shares some of your own feelings and has made of these a work of art which you have the insight, sensitivity, and—like it or not—peculiar set of experiences to appreciate. Amazing thing to say, the consolation of horror in art is that it actually intensifies our panic, loudens it on the sounding-board of our horror-hollowed hearts, turns terror up full blast, all the while reaching for that perfect and deafening amplitude at which we may dance to the bizarre music of our own misery.

The Consolations Of Horror (1989 Crypt of Cthulhu Version)

First published in *Dark Horizons* #27, 1984

Darkness, We Welcome and Embrace You

Horror, at least in its artistic presentations, can be a comfort. And, like any agent of enlightenment, it may even confer—if briefly—a sense of power, wisdom, and transcendence, especially if the conferee is a willing one with a true feeling for ancient mysteries and a true fear of the skulduggery which a willing heart usually senses in the unknown.

Clearly we (just the willing conferees, remember) want to know the worst, both about ourselves and the world. The oldest, possibly the only theme is that of forbidden knowledge. And no forbidden knowledge ever consoled its possessor. (Which is probably why it's forbidden.) At best it is one of the more sardonic gifts bestowed upon the individual (for knowledge of the forbidden is first and foremost an individual ordeal). It is particularly forbidden because the mere possibility of such knowledge introduces a monstrous and perverse temptation to trade the quiet pleasures of mundane existence for the bright lights of alienage, doom, and, in some rare cases, eternal damnation.

So we not only wish to *know* the worst, but to experience it as well.

Hence that arena of artificial experience is supposedly the worst kind—the horror story—where gruesome conspiracies may be trumped up to our soul's satisfaction, where the deck is stacked with shivers, shocks, and dismembered hands for every player; and, most importantly, where one, at a safe distance, can come to grips (after a fashion) with death, pain, and loss in the, quote, real world, unquote.

But does it ever work the way we would like it to?

A Test Case

I am watching Night of the Living Dead for the tenth time. I see the ranks of the deceased reanimated by a double-edged marvel of the modern age (atomic radiation, I think. Or is it some wonder chemical which found its way into the water supply? And does this detail even matter?) I see a group of average, almost documentary types holed up in a house, fighting off wave after wave of hungry ghouls. I see the group hopelessly losing their ground and succumb each one of them to the same disease as their sleepwalking attackers: A husband tries to eat his wife (or is it mother tries to eat child?), a daughter stabs her father with a gardener's trowel (or perhaps brother stabs sister with a bricklayer's trowel). In any case, they all die, and horribly. This is the important thing.

When the movie is over, I am bolstered by the sense of having rung the ear-shattering changes of harrowing horror; I've got another bad one under my belt (no less than for the tenth time) which will serve to bolster my nerves for whatever shocking days and nights are to come; I have, in a phrase, *an expanded capacity for fear*. I can really take it!

At the movies, that is.

The fearful truth is that all of the above brutalities can be taken only too well. And then, at some point, one starts to adopt unnatural strategies to ward off not the bogey but the sand man. Talking to the characters in a horror film, for instance: Hi, Mr. Decomposing Corpse lapping up a lump of sticky entrails, Hi! But even this tactic loses its charm after a while, especially if you're watching some “shocker” by yourself and lack an accomplice to share your latest stage of jadedness and immunity to primitive fright. (At the movies, I mean. Otherwise you're the same old vulnerable self.)

So after a devoted horror fan is stuffed to the gills, thoroughly sated and consequently bored—what does he (the he's traditionally out-number the she's here) do next? Haunt the emergency rooms of hospitals or the local morgues? Keep an eye out for the bloody mishaps on the freeway? Become a war correspondent? But now the issue has been blatantly shifted to a completely different plane—from movies to life—and clearly it doesn't belong there.

The one remedy for the horror addict's problem seems this: that if the old measure of medicine is just not strong enough—increase the dosage! (This pharmaceutical parallel is ancient but apt.) And thus we have the well-known and very crude basis for the horror film's history of ever-escalating scare tactics. Have you already seen such old classics as *Werewolf of London* too many times? Sample one of its gore-enriched, yet infinitely inferior versions of the early 1980s. Of course the relief is only temporary; one's tolerance to the drug tends to increase. And looking down that long open road there appears to be no ultimate drugstore in sight, no final pharmacy where the horror hunger can be glutted on a sufficiently enormous dose, where the once insatiable addict

may, at last, be laden with all the demonic dope there is, collapse with sated obesity into the shadows, and quietly gasp: “enough.”

The empty pit of boredom is ever renewing itself, while the horror films become less tantalizing to the marginally sadistic moviegoer.

And what is the common rationale for justifying what would otherwise be considered a just barely frustrated case of sadomasochism? Now we remember: to present us with horrors inside the theater (or the books, let's not forget those) and thereby help us to assimilate the horrors on the outside, and also to ready us for the Big One. This does sound reasonable, it sounds right and rational. But none of this has anything to do with these three R's. We are in the great forest of fear, where you can't fight real experiences of the worst with fake ones (no matter how well synchronized a symbolic correspondence they may have). When is the last time you heard of someone screaming himself awake from a nightmare, only to shrug it off with: “Yeah, but I've seen worse at the movies” (or read worse in the books; we'll get to them)? Nothing is worse than that which happens personally to a person. And though a bad dream may momentarily register quite high on the fright meter, it is, realistically speaking, one of the less enduring, smaller time terrors a person is up against. Try drawing solace from your half-dozen viewings of the *Texas Chain-Saw Massacre* when they're prepping you for brain surgery.

In all truth, frequenters of horror films are a jumpier, more casually hysterical class of person than most. (Statistics available on request.) We need the most reassurance that we can take it as well as anyone, and we tend to be the most

complacent in thinking that seventeen straight nights of supernatural-psycho films is good for the nerves and will give us a special power which non-horror fanatics don't have. After all, this is supposed to be a major psychological selling point of the horror racket, the first among its consolations.

It is undoubtedly the first consolation, but it's also a false one.

Interlude: *So Long, Consolations Of Mayhem*

Perhaps it was a mistake selecting *Night of the Living Dead* to illustrate the consolations of horror. As a delegate from Horrorland this film is admirably incorruptible, oozing integrity. It hasn't sold out to the kindergarten moral codes of most "modern horror" movies and it has no particular message to deliver: its only news is nightmare. For pure brain-chomping, nerve-chewing, sight-cursing insanity, this is a very effective work, at least the first couple of times or so. It neither tries nor pretends to be anything beyond that. (And as we have already found, nothing exists beyond that anyway, except more and more of *that*.) But the big trouble is that sometimes we forget how much more can be done in horror movies (books too!) than that. We sometimes forget that supernatural stories—and this is a very good time to boot non-supernatural ones right off the train: psycho, suspense, and the like—are capable of all the functions and feelings of *real* stories. For the supernatural can serve as a trusty vehicle for careening into realms where the Strange and the Familiar charge each other with the opposing poles of their passion.

The Haunting, for example. Besides being the greatest haunted house film ever made, it is also a great haunted hu-

man one. In it the ancient spirit of mortal tragedy passes easily through walls dividing the mysteries of the mundane world from those of the extra-mundane. And this supertragic specter never comes to rest in either one of these worlds; it never lingers long enough to give us forbidden knowledge of either the stars or ourselves, or anything else for that matter. To what extent may the "derangement of Hill House" (Dr. Markway's diagnosis) be blamed on the derangement of the people who were, are, and probably will be in it? And vice versa of course. Is there something wrong with that spiral staircase in the library or just with the clumsy persons who try to climb it? The only safe bet is that something is wrong, wherever the wrongness lies... and lies and lies. Our poor quartet of spook-chasers—Dr. Markway, Theo, Luke, and Eleanor—are not only helpless to untie themselves from entangling puppet strings; they can't even find the knots!

The ghosts at Hill House always remain unseen, except in their effects: savagely pummelling enormous oak doors, bending them like cardboard; writing assonant messages on walls ("Help Eleanor come home") with an unspecified substance ("Chalk," says Luke. "Or something *like* chalk," corrects Markway); and in general giving the place a very bad feeling. We're not even sure who the ghosts are, or rather were. The pious and demented Hugh Crane, who built Hill House? His spinster daughter Abigail, who wasted away in Hill House? Her neglectful companion, who hung herself in Hill House? None of them emerges as a discrete, clearly definable haunter of the old mansion. Instead we have an undefined presence which seems a sort of melting pot of deranged forces from the past, an anti-America where the very

poorest in spirit settle and stagnate and lose themselves in a massive and insane spectral body.

Easier to identify are the personal specters of the living, at least for the viewer. But the characters in the film are too busy with outside things to look inside one another's houses, or even their own. Dr. Markway doesn't acknowledge Eleanor's spooks. (She loves him, hopelessly.) Eleanor can't see Theo's spooks (she's lesbian) and Theo avoids dwelling on her own. (“And what are you afraid of, Theo?” asks Eleanor. “Of knowing what I really want,” she replies, somewhat uncandidly.) Best of all, though, is Luke, who doesn't think there ever are any spooks, until near the end of the film when this affable fun-seeker gains an excruciating sense of the alienation, perversity, and strangeness of the world around him. “It should be burned to the ground,” he says of the high priced house he is to inherit, “and the earth sown with salt.” This quasi-biblical quote indicates that more than a few doors have been kicked down in Luke's private passageways. He *knows* now! Poor Eleanor, of course, has been claimed by the house as one of its lonely, faceless citizens of eternity. It is her voice that gets to deliver the reverberant last lines of the film: “Hill House has stood for eighty years and will probably stand for eighty more... but whatever walks there, walks alone.” With these words the viewer glimpses a realm of unimaginable pain and horror, an unfathomable region of aching Gothic turmoil, a weird nevermoresville.

The experience is extremely disconsoling but nonetheless exhilarating.

But for a movie to convey such intense feeling for the supernatural is rare. (This one of course is a scrupulously faith-

ful adaptation of Shirley Jackson's unarguably excellent novel.) The thing that is quite common, especially with fiction, is the phenomenon that produced the single-sentence paragraph above; in other words—the horror story's paradox of entertainment. The thumping heart of the question, though, is what really entertains us? In opposition, that is, to what we only imagine entertains us. Entertainment, whatever we imagine its real source, is rightly regarded as its own justification, and this seems to be one of the unassailable consolations of horror. But is it? (This won't take long.)

Another Test Case

We are reading—in a quiet, cozy room, it goes without saying—one of M. R. James' powerful ghost stories. It is "Count Magnus," in which a curious scholar gains knowledge he didn't even know was forbidden and suffers the resultant doom at the hands of the count and his betentacled companion. The story actually ends before we have a chance to witness its fabulous coup de grace, but we know that a sucked-off face is in store for our scholar. Meanwhile we sit on the sidelines (sipping a warm drink, probably) as the doomed academic meets a fate worse than any we'll ever know. At least we think it's worse, we hope it is... deep, deep in the subcellars of our minds we pray: "Please don't let anything even *like* that happen to me! Not to *me*. Let it always be the other guy and I'll read about him, even tremble for him a little. Besides, I'm having so much fun, it can't be all that terrible. For him, that is. For me it would be unbearable. See how shaky and excitable I get just *reading* about it. So please let it always be the other guy."

But it can't always be the other guy, for in the long run we're all, each of us, the other guy.

Of course in the short run it's one of life's minor ecstasies —an undoubted entertainment—to read about a world in which the very worst doom takes place in a restricted area we would never ever wander into and befalls somebody else. And this is the run in which all stories are read, as well as written. (If something with eyes like two runny eggs were after your carcass, would you sit down and write a story about it?) It's another world, the short run; it's a world where horror really is a true consolation. But it's no compliment to Dr. James or to ourselves as readers to put too much stock in ghost stories as a consolation for our mortality, our vulnerability to real-life terrors. As consolations go, this happens to be a pretty low-grade one—demented complacency posing as beatitudes.

So our second consolation lives on borrowed time at best. And in the long-run—where no mere tale can do you much good—is delusory.

(Perhaps the stories of H.P. Lovecraft offer a more threatening and admirable role to those of us devoted to doom. In Lovecraft's work doom is not restricted to eccentric characters in eccentric situations. It begins there but ultimately expands to violate the safety zone of the reader (and the nonreader for that matter, though the latter remains innocent of Lovecraft's forbidden knowledge). M. R. James' are cautionary tales, lessons in how to stay out of spectral trouble and how nice and safe it feels to do so. But within the cosmic boundaries of Lovecraft's universe, which many would call the universe itself, we are already in trouble, and feeling safe is out of the question for anyone with some brains and a

chance access to the manuscripts of Albert Wilmarth, Nathaniel Wingate Peaslee, or Prof. Angell's nephew. These isolated narrators take us with them into their doom, which is the world's. (No one ever gives a hoot what happens to Lovecraft's characters as individuals.) If we knew what they know about the world and about our alarmingly tentative place in it, our brains would indeed reel with the revelation. And if we found out what Arthur Jermyn found out about ourselves and our humble origins in a mere madness of biology, we would do as he did with a few gallons of gasoline and a merciful match. Of course Lovecraft insists on telling us things it does no good to know: things that can't help us or protect us or even prepare us for the awful and inevitable apocalypse to come. The only comfort is to accept it, live in it, and sigh yourself into the balm of living oblivion. If you can only maintain this constant sense of doom, you may be spared the pain of foolish hopes and their impending demolishment.

But we can't maintain it: only a saint of doom could. Hope leaks into our lives by way of spreading cracks we always meant to repair but never did. Oddly enough, when the cracks yawn their widest, and the promised deluge comes at last, it is not hope at all that finally breaks through and drowns us.

Interlude: See You Later, Consolations Of Doom

So when a fictional state of absolute doom no longer offers us possibilities of comfort—what's left? Well, another stock role casts one not as the victim of a horror story but as the villain in it. That is, we get to be the monster for a change. To a certain extent this is supposed to happen when

we walk onto those resounding floorboards behind the Gothic footlights. It's traditional to identify with and feel sorry for the vampire or the werewolf in their ultimate moment of weakness, a time when they're most human. Sometimes, though, it seems as if there's much fun to be had playing a vampire or werewolf at the height of each's monstrous, people-maiming power. To play them in our hearts, I mean. After all, it would be kind of great to wake up at dusk every day and cruise around in the shadows and fly on batwings through the night, stare strangers in the eye and have them under your power. Not bad for someone who's supposed to be dead. Or rather, for someone who can't die and whose soul is not his own; for someone who—no matter how seemingly suave—is doomed to ride eternity with a single and highly embarrassing obsession, the most debased junkie immortalized.

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and solitude and all those things from which mere people have much to fear. There you are under the moon—a raging storm in human form. And you'll always be like that, forever if you're careful. Being a human being is a dead end anyway. It would seem that supernatural sociopaths have more possibilities open to them. So wouldn't it be great to be one? What I mean, of course, is: is it a consolation of horror fiction to let us be one for a little while? Yes, it really is; the attractions of this life are sometimes irresistible. But are we missing some point if we only see the glamour and ignore the drudgery in the existence of these free spirited nyctophiles? Well, are we?

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with our own lives, which is the only life there is, and god-likeness has nothing at all to do with it.

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Darkness, You've Done A Lot For Us

At this point it may seem that the consolations of horror are not what we thought they were, that all this time we've been keeping company with illusions. Well, we have. And we'll continue to do so, continue to seek the appalling scene which short-circuits our brain, continue to sit in our numb coziness with a book of terror on our laps like a cataleptic predator, and continue to draw smug solace, if only for the space of a story, from a world made snug and simple by absolute hopelessness and doom. There consolations are still effective, even if they don't work as well as we would prefer them to. But they are only effective, like most things of value in art or life, *as illusions*. And there's no point attributing to them powers of therapy or salvation they don't and can't have. There are enough disappointments in the world without adding that one.

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Alice's Last Adventure (2010 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

First published in *Songs Of A Dead Dreamer*, 1985

> "Preston, stop laughing. They ate the whole back-yard. They ate your mother's favorite flowers! It's not funny, Preston."
> "Aaaaa heh-heh-heh-heh-heh. Aaaaa heh-heh-heh-heh-heh."

—*Preston and the Starving Shadows*

A long time ago, Preston Penn made up his mind to ignore the passing years and join the ranks of those who remain forever in a kind of half-world between childhood and adolescence. He would not give up the bold satisfaction of eating insects (crispy flies are his favorite), nor that peculiar drunkenness of a child's brain, induplicable once grown-up sobriety has set in. The result was that Preston successfully negotiated quite a few decades without ever coming within hailing distance of puberty. In this state of arrested development, he defiantly lived through many a perverse adventure. And he still lives in the pages of those books I wrote about him, though I stopped writing them some years ago.

Did he have a prototype? I should say so. One doesn't just *invent* a character like Preston using only the pitiful powers of imagination. He was very much a concoction of reality, later adapted for my popular series of children's books. Preston's status in both reality and imagination has always held a great fascination for me. In the past year, however, this issue has especially demanded my attention, not without some personal annoyance and even anxiety. Then again, perhaps I'm getting senile.

My age is no secret, since it can be looked up in a number of literary reference sources. Over twenty years ago, when the last Preston book appeared (*Preston and the Upside-Down Face*), one reviewer rather snootily referred to me as the "'Grande Damned' of a particular sort of children's literature." What *sort* you can imagine if you don't otherwise know, if you didn't grow up—or not grow up, as it were—reading Preston's adventures with the Dead Mask, the Starving Shadows, or the Lonely Mirror.

Even as a little girl, I knew I wanted to be an author; and I also knew just the kind of tales I would tell. Let someone else give preadolescents their literary introductions to life and love, guiding them through those volatile years when *anything* might go wrong and landing them safely on the shores of incipient maturity. That was never my destiny. Instead, I would write about a puckish little character based on a real-life childhood playmate of mine whose deeds of mischief were legend throughout the small town where I was born and raised. As Preston Penn, my erstwhile chum could throw off the shackles of material existence and explore the mysteries of an upside-down, inside-out, faintly sinister, and always askew universe. The embodiment of topsy-turvydom,

Preston gained a reputation as a champion of misbehavior and an adventurer who looked beneath the surface of everyday things—pools of rainwater, tarnished mirrors, moonlit windows—to discover a stunning sortilege, usually with the purpose of stunning in turn his perennial foe: the dictatorial world of adulthood. A conjurer of stylish nightmares, he gave his grown-up adversaries fits and sleepless nights. No dilettante of the extraordinary, but its personification. Such is the spiritual biography of Preston Penn.

But to give credit where credit is due, it was my father, just as much as Preston's original, who provided the spark for the stories I've written. To put it briefly, Father had the blood of a child coursing through his big adult body, flooding with fancy the overly sophisticated brain of Foxborough College's associate professor of philosophy. Typical of his character was a love for the books of Lewis Carroll, and thus the genesis of my name. When I was old enough to understand such things, my mother told me that while she was pregnant my father *willed* me into a little Alice. That sounded like something he would say.

I remember one occasion when Father was reading *Through the Looking-Glass* to me for the umpteenth time. Suddenly he stopped, closed the book, and said to me, as if in deep confidence, that there was more in the Alice books than anyone knew. But that *he* knew, and someday would tell me. To Father, the creator of Alice, as I later came to see it, was a symbol of psychic supremacy, the sterling ideal of an unstrictured mind manipulating reality to its whim and gaining a kind of objective force through the minds of others. And it was very important to Father that I share “The Master's” books in the same spirit.

"See, honey," he would say while rereading *Through the Looking Glass* to me, "see how smart little Alice right away notices that the room on the other side of the mirror is not as 'tidy' as the one she just came from. Not as *tidy*," he repeated with professorial emphasis but chuckling like a child, a strange little laugh that I inherited from him. "Not tidy. We know what *that* means, don't we?" I would look up at him and nod with all the solemnity that my six, seven, eight years could muster.

And I did know what *that* meant. I felt intimations of a thousand misshapen marvels—of things going haywire in curious ways, of the edge of the world where an endless ribbon of road continued into space by itself, of a universe handed over to new gods.

Father's imagination seemed to work nonstop. Squinting at my roundish child's countenance—saying, "Ooooh, look how she shines so bright!"—he called me "Little Moon Face."

"*You're* a little moon face," I playfully talked back.

"No, *you* are," he would say.

"Am not."

"Are too."

We'd continued this back and forth until both of us burst out laughing. When I got older, my features became more angular, an involuntary betrayal of my father's conception of his little Alice. I suppose it was a blessing that he did not live to see me succumb to the despoilments of time, saved from this heartbreak by a sudden explosion in his brain while he was giving a lecture at the college. So Father never had the chance to tell me what it was that he knew about the Alice books that nobody else did.

But perhaps he would have perceived that my maturation was only skin deep, that I just superficially picked up the conventional behaviors of an aging soul (nervous breakdown, divorce, remarriage, alcoholism, widowhood, stoic tolerance of a second-rate reality) without destroying the Alice he loved. She *must* have been kept alive, or so I would like to think, because it was she who wrote all those books about her soul mate Preston, even if she has not written one for many years now. Oh, those years, those years.

So much for the past.

At present I would like to deal with just a single year, the one ending today—about an hour from now, judging by the clock that just chimed eleven p.m. from the shadows on the other side of this study. During the past three hundred and sixty-five days I have noticed, sometimes just barely, an accumulation of curiouser and curiouser episodes in my life. A lack of tidiness, one might say, which may be partly due to the fact that I've been drinking rather heavily again.

Some of the previously mentioned episodes are so elusive and insubstantial that it would be a real chore to talk about them, except perhaps in terms of the moods they leave behind like fingerprints, and which I've learned to read like divinatory signs. My task will be less taxing if I confine myself for the most part to the grosser incidents I have to recount, thereby making it easier to give them a modicum of the sense and structure I could use just now. A tidying up as it were—neat as a pin, straight and sure as the green lines on the yellow page before me.

I should start by identifying tonight as that immovable feast which Preston always devotedly observed, celebrating it most intensely in *Preston and the Ghost of the Gourd* (even if

time has almost run out on this holiday, according to the clock ticking at my back; though from the look of things, the hands seem stuck on the hour I reported a couple of paragraphs ago. Perhaps I misjudged it before.) For some years I've made an appearance at the local suburban library on this night to give a reading from one of my books as the main event of an annual Hallowe'en fest. Tonight I managed to show up once again for the reading, even if I hesitate to say everything went *as usual*. Last year, however, I did not make it at all to the costume party. This brings me to what I *think* is the first in a year-long series of disruptions unknown to a biography previously marked by nothing more than episodes of conventional chaos. My apologies for taking two steps backward before one step forward. As an old hand at storytelling, I realize this is always a risky approach when bidding for a reader's attention. But here goes.

It was one year ago today that I cancelled my reading at the library to attend an out-of-town funeral of someone from my past. This was none other than that sprite of special genius whose exploits served as the *prima materia* for my Preston Penn books. The excursion was one of pure nostalgia, however, for I hadn't actually seen this person since my twelfth birthday party. It was soon afterward that my father died, and my mother and I moved out of our house in North Sable, Mass. (see *Childhood Homes of Children's Authors* for a photo of the old two-story frame job), heading for the big city and away from sad reminders. A local teacher who knew of my work, and its beginnings in North S, sent me a newspaper clipping from the *Sable Sentinel* which reported the demise of my former playmate and even adverted to his secondhand literary fame.

I arrived in town very quietly and was immediately overwhelmed by the lack of change in the place, as if it had existed all those years in a state of suspended animation and had been only recently reanimated for my benefit. It almost seemed that I might run into my old neighbors, schoolmates, and even Mr. So and So who ran the ice-cream shop, which I was amazed to see still in operation. On the other side of the window, a big man with a walrus mustache was digging ice cream from large cardboard cylinders, while two chubby kids pressed their bellies against the counter. The man hadn't changed the least bit over the years. He looked up and saw me staring into the shop, and there really seemed to be a twinkle of recognition in his puffy eyes. But that was impossible. He could have never perceived behind my ancient mask the child's face he once knew, even if he had been Mr. So and So and not his look-alike (son? grandson?). There we were: two complete strangers gawking at each other, both of us actors performing together on the same stage but playing out different dramas. It brought to mind one of my early books, *Preston and the Two-Faced Clock*, wherein time goes by so fast that it stands still.

I shook off the black comedy of errors at the ice-cream shop and proceeded to my destination, only to find that another farce of mistaken identity awaited me there. For a few moments I paused and looked up at the words on the lintel atop the double doors of that cold colonial building: G. V. Ness and Sons, Funeral Directors. Talk about time going by so fast that it stands still, or seems to. During the years I'd lived in North Sable, I had entered this establishment only once (“Good-bye, Daddy”). But such places always seem familiar, having that perfectly vacant, neutral atmosphere

common to all funeral homes, the same in my hometown as in the suburb outside New York (“Good riddance, Hubby”) where I'm now secluded.

I strolled into the proper room unnoticed, another anonymous mourner who was a bit shy about approaching the casket. Though I drew a couple of small-town stares, the elderly, elegant author from the big city did not stand out as much as she thought she would. But with or without distinction, it remained my intention to introduce myself to the widow as a childhood friend of her deceased husband. This intention, however, was shot all to hell by two ox-like men who rose from their seats on either side of the grieving lady and lumbered my way. For some reason I panicked.

“You must be Dad's Cousin Winnie from Boston. The family's heard so much about you over the years,” they said.

I smiled widely and gulped deeply, which must have looked like a nod of affirmation to them. In any case, they led me over to “Mom” and introduced me under my inadvertent pseudonym to the red-eyed, half-delirious old woman. (Why, I wonder, did I allow this goof to go on?)

“Nice to finally meet you, and thank you for the lovely card you sent,” she said, sniffing loudly and working on her eyes with a grotesquely soiled handkerchief. “I'm Elsie.”

Elsie Chester, I thought immediately, though I wasn't entirely sure that this was the same person who was rumored to have sold kisses and other things to the boys at North Sable Elementary. So he had married *her*, whaddaya know? Possibly they *had* to get married, I speculated cattily. At least one of her sons looked of sufficient age to have been the consequence of teenage impatience. Oh, well. So much for Preston's vow to wed no one less than the Queen of Nightmares.

But even greater disappointments awaited my notice. After chatting emptily with the widow for a few more moments, I excused myself to pay my respects at the coffinside of the deceased. Until then I'd deliberately averted my gaze from that flower-crazed area at the front of the room, where a shiny, pearl-grey casket held its occupant in much the same position as the "Traveling Tomb" racer he'd once constructed. This part of the mortuary ritual never fails to make me think about those corpse-viewing sessions to which children in the nineteenth century were subjected in order to acquaint them with their own mortality. At my age this was unnecessary, so allow me to skip quickly over this scene with a few tragic and inevitable words...

Bald and blemished, that was rather expected. *Totally* unfamiliar, that wasn't. The mosquito-faced child I once knew was now repulsively bloated and saggy, swollen up and puffy-lipped like some unidentifiable corpse the cops might find in a river. Patently, he had overfed himself at the turgid banquet of life, lethargically pushing away from the table just prior to explosion. The thing before me was a portrait of all that was defunct, used up—the ultimate adult. (But perhaps in death, I consoled myself, his child self was even now ripping off the false face of the overgrown-up before me.)

After paying homage to the remains of a memory, I slipped out of the room with a stealth my Preston would have been proud of. I'd left behind an envelope with a modest contribution to the widow's fund. I had half a mind to send a batch of gaping black orchids to the funeral home with a note signed by Laetitia Simpson, Preston's dwarfish girlfriend. But this was something that the other Alice would have done—the one who wrote those creepy books.

As for me, I got into my car and drove out of town to the nearest fine hotel, where I found a nice suite—spoils of a successful literary career—and a bar. And as it turned out, this overnight layover must take us down another side road (or back road, if you like) of my narrative. Please stand by.

A late-afternoon crowd had settled into the hotel's cocktail lounge, relieving me of the necessity of drinking in solitude. After a couple of Scotches on the rocks, I noticed a young man looking my way from across the room. At least he appeared young from a distance. Emboldened by booze, I walked over to sit at his table. And with every step I took he seemed to gain a few years. He was now only relatively young—from an old dowager's point of view, that is. His name was Hank De Vere, and he worked for a distributor of gardening tools and other such products. But let's not pretend to care about the details. Later we had dinner together, after which I invited him to my suite.

It was the next morning, by the way, that inaugurated that year-long succession of experiences which I'm methodically trying to sort out with a few select examples. Half step forward coming up: pawn to king three.

I awoke in the darkness specific to hotel bedrooms, abnormally heavy curtains masking the morning light. Immediately it became apparent that I was alone. My new acquaintance seemed to have a more developed sense of tact and timing than I had given him credit for. At least I thought so at first. But then I looked through the open doorway into the other room, where I could see a convex mirror in a wood frame on the wall.

The bulging eye of the mirror surveyed the entirety of the next room, and I noticed that something was moving around

in the reflecting glass. A tiny, misshapen figure seemed to be gyring about, leaping and twirling in a madcap way that should have been audible to me. But it wasn't.

I called out a name I barely remembered from the night before. There came no answer from the next room, but the movement in the mirror stopped, and the tiny figure (whatever it was) disappeared. Very cautiously I got up from the bed, robed myself, and peeked around the corner of the doorway like a curious child on Christmas morning. A strange combination of relief and confusion arose in me when I saw that there was no one else in the suite.

I approached the mirror, perhaps to search its surface for the little *something* that might have caused the illusion. My memory is vague on this point, since at the time I was a bit hung over. But I can recall with spectacular vividness what I finally saw after gazing into the mirror for a few moments. Suddenly the sphered glass before me became clouded with a mysterious fog, from the depths of which appeared the waxy face of a corpse. It was the visage of that old cadaver I'd seen at the funeral home, now with eyes wide open and staring into mine. Or so it seemed for a moment before I put on my glasses. And when I did all I saw was only my own face... a corpselike kisser if ever there was one. *Preston and the Looking-Glass Ghoul*, I thought, feeling almost inspired to take up my pen once more.

And this inspiration was again aroused a short while later when I was checking out at the front desk. As the clerk was fiddling with my bill, I happened to look out of a nearby window, beyond which two chubby children were romping on the hotel lawn. After a few seconds the kids caught me watching them. They stopped and stared back at their audi-

ence, standing perfectly still, side by side. Then they stuck out their tongues at me before running away. (And how much they looked like the odious Hatley twins featured in *Preston and the Talking Grave*.) The room took a little spin that only I seemed to notice, while others went calmly about their business. Possibly this experience can be ascribed to my failure to employ any post-debauch remedies that morning. The old nerves were somewhat shot, and my stomach was giving me no peace. Still, I've remained in pretty fair health over the years, and I drove back home without further incident.

That was a year ago. Now get ready for one giant step forward: the old queen is now in play.

In the succeeding twelve months I have noted a number of similar happenings, though they occurred with varying degrees of clarity. Most of them approached the fleeting nature of déjà-vu phenomena. A few could be pegged as self-manufactured, while others lacked a definite source. I might see a phrase or the fragment of an image that would make my heart flip over (not a healthy thing at my age), while my mind searched for some correspondence that triggered this powerful sense of familiarity: the sound of a delayed echo with oblique origins. I delved into dreams, half-conscious perceptions, and the distortions of memory, but all that remained was a chain of occurrences with links as weak as smoke rings.

But today, as pumpkins leer from porches and pillow-case ghosts swing on tree branches, this tenuous haunting has gained a more substantial consistency. It started this morning and continued throughout the day with increasingly more defined and evocative manifestations. Again, my hope

is that I may tidy up my psyche by documenting these episodes, beginning with one that now seems a prefiguration of those to come. Lucid exposition is what's needed. Thus:

Place: the bathroom. Time: a little after eight a.m.

The water was running for my morning wash-up, cascading into the tub a bit noisily for my sensitive ears. The night before, I suffered from an advanced case of insomnia, which even extra doses of my beloved Guardsman's Reserve Stock did not help. I was very glad to see a sunny autumn morning come and rescue me. My bathroom mirror, however, would not let me forget the sleepless night I'd spent, and I combed and creamed myself without noticeable improvement. Chessie was with me, lying atop the toilet tank and scrutinizing the waters of the bowl below. She was actually staring very hard and deliberately at something.

“What is it, Chessie?” I asked with the patronizing voice of a pet owner. Her tail had a life of its own; she stood up and hissed, then yowled in that horribly demonic falsetto of threatened felines. Finally she dashed out of the bathroom, relinquishing her ground for the first time since she was a kitten.

I had been loitering at the other side of the room, a groggy bystander to an unexpected incident. With a large plastic hairbrush gripped in my left hand, I investigated. I gazed down into the same waters. And though at first they seemed clear enough, something soon appeared from within its porcelain burrow. However, it retreated too soon back into the plumbing for me to say what it was. All that remained was a squiggly imprint on my memory. But I could not bring it into mental focus. It was as if I saw the thing and did not see it at the same time. Even so, whatever it may

have been engendered a flurry of impressions within me, as of a confused nightmare that leaves behind only a pang of horror upon its dreamer. I wouldn't even bring up this installment in my story if I didn't think it related to another that occurred later on.

This afternoon I began preparing myself for the reading I was to give at the library, the preparation being mostly alcoholic. I've never looked forward to this annual ordeal and only put up with it out of a sense of duty, vanity, and other less comprehensible motives. Maybe this is why I welcomed the excuse to skip it last year. And I wanted to skip it this year, too, if only I could have come up with a reason satisfactory to the others involved—and, more importantly, to myself. Wouldn't want to disappoint the children, would I? Of course not, though heaven only knows why. Children have made me nervous ever since I stopped being one of them. Perhaps this is why I never had any of my own—adopted any, that is—for the doctors told me long ago that I'm about as fertile as the seas of the moon.

The other Alice is the one who's really comfortable with kids and kiddish things. How else could she have written *Preston and the Laughing This* or *Preston and the Twitching That*? So when it comes time to do this reading every year, I try to put *her* onstage as much as possible, something that's becoming more difficult with the passing years. Oddly enough, it's my grown-up's weakness for spirits that allows me to do this most effectively. With each sip of Scotch that passed my lips today I felt more at ease.

The sun was going down in a pumpkin-colored blaze when I arrived at the little one-story library. Some costumed kids were hanging around outside: a werewolf, a black cat

with a long curling tail, an extraterrestrial with fewer fingers than humans and more eyes. Coming up the walk was Tinkerbell escorted by a pirate. In spite of myself, I couldn't help smiling at the whole scene. For the first time in quite a while, this pageant of masqueraders brought back memories of my own childhood when my father took me trick-or-treating. (His love of this night was easily as avid as Preston's). Having gotten into the spirit of this eve, I was feeling quite confident as I entered the library and confronted a flock of youngsters. But the spell was maliciously broken when some smart aleck called out from the crowd, shouting: “Hey, lookit the mask *she's* wearing.” After that I propelled myself down several linoleum hallways in search of a friendly adult face.

Finally I passed the open door of a tidy little room where a group of ladies and the head librarian, Mr. Grosz, were sipping coffee. Mr. Grosz said how nice it was to see me again and introduced me to the moms who were helping out with the party.

“My William's read all your books,” said a full-figured Mrs. Harley. “I just can't keep him away from them.” Not for lack of trying, I thought, judging by the quietly infuriated tone of her voice. My only reply was a dignified smile.

Mr. Grosz offered me some coffee but I declined: bad for the stomach. Then he wickedly suggested that, as it was starting to get dark outside, the time seemed right for the festivities to begin. My reading was to inaugurate the evening's fun, a good spooky story “to get everyone in the mood.” First, though, I needed to get myself in the mood, and pardoned myself to a use the ladies’ room, where I could refortify my fluttering nerves from a flask I had stowed away

in my purse. As a strange and embarrassing social gesture, Mr. Grosz offered to wait right outside the lavatory until I finished.

"I'm quite ready now, Mr. Grosz," I said, glaring down at the little man from atop an unelderly pair of high heels. He cleared his throat, and I almost thought he was going to extend a crooked arm for me to take. But instead he merely stretched it out to indicate, in a stock gentlemanly manner, the way to go. I think he might even have bowed.

He led me back down the hallway toward the children's section of the library, where I assumed my reading would take place as it always had in the past. However, we walked right by this area, which was dark and empty, and proceeded down a flight of stairs leading to the library's basement. "Our new facility," bragged Mr. Grosz. "Converted one of the storage rooms into a small auditorium of sorts." We were now facing a large metal door painted an institutional shade of green. It looked for all the world as if it might lead into the back ward of a madhouse. I could hear screaming on the other side, which sounded to me like the cries of bedlamites rather than the clamor of rambunctious kids. "Which one will it be tonight?" asked Mr. Grosz while staring at my left hand. "*Preston and the Starving Shadows*," I answered, showing him the book I was holding. He smiled and confided that it was one of his favorites. Then he opened the door for me, pushing its weight with both hands, and we entered what chamber of horrors I knew not.

Over fifty kids were sitting in or standing on or knocking over their seats. Shouting from the podium at the front of the long, narrow room, a pointy-hatted witch was outlining the party activities for the night; and when she saw Mr.

Grosz and me arrive, she began telling the children about a "special treat for us all," meaning that the half-crocked lady author was about to deliver a half-cocked oration. "Let's give her a big hand," she said, clapping as I stepped onto the rickety-looking platform. I thanked everyone for inviting me to their party and fixed my book on a lamp-bearing lectern decorated with wizened cornstalks. Then I tried my best to warm up the crowd with a little patter about the story everyone was going to hear. When I invoked the name of Preston Penn, a few kids actually cheered, or at least one did at the rear of the room. I assumed it was William Harley.

Just as I was about to begin reading, something happened I had not been led to expect—the lights were switched off. ("It slipped my mind entirely," Mr. Grosz apologized afterward.) In the dark, I noticed that facing each other on opposite sides of the room were two rows of jack-o'-lanterns glowing orange and yellow from on high. They all had identical faces and looked like mirror reflections of one another, with triangular eyes and noses and wailing Os for mouths. (As a child, I was convinced that pumpkins naturally grew this way, complete with facial features and phosphorescent insides.) Furthermore, they seemed to be suspended in space, their means of support concealed by the darkness, which also hid within it the faces of the children. Thus, these jack-o'-lanterns became my audience.

But as I read, the real audience asserted itself with foot shuffling, whispers, and some rather ingenious noises made with the folding wooden chairs they were sitting in. I also heard a "devilish giggling," in the words I employed to describe the snickering laughter of the very imp whose story I was reciting. Toward the end of the reading, there came a

low moan from somewhere in the back, and it sounded as if a seat had fallen over along with whomever was sitting in it. “It's all right,” I heard an adult voice call out. The door at the back opened, allowing a moment of brightness to break the spooky spell, and some shadows exited. When the lights came on at the end of the story, I noticed that one of the seats in the last row was missing its occupant.

“Okay, kids,” said the parental witch after some minor applause for Preston, “everyone move their chairs against the walls and make room for the games and stuff.”

The games and stuff had the room in a low-grade uproar. Masked children ruled the night, indulging their appetite for sweet things to eat and drink, disorder for its own sake, and high-spirited pandemonium. I stood at the periphery of the commotion and chatted with Mr. Grosz.

“What exactly was the disturbance all about?” I asked him. “Did one of the kids have a spell of some kind?”

He took a gulp from a plastic cup of cider and smacked his lips offensively. “Oh, it was nothing. You see that child there with the black-cat outfit? She seemed to have fainted. But once we got her outside she was all right. She had on her kitty mask all through your reading, and I think the poor thing hyperventilated or something like that. Complained that she saw something in her mask and was very frightened for a while. At any rate, you can see she's fine now, and she's even wearing her mask again. Amazing how children can put things right out of their minds and recover so quickly.”

I agreed that it was amazing, and then asked precisely what it was the child thought she saw in her mask. I couldn't help being reminded of another cat earlier in the day that also saw something that gave her a fright.

“She couldn't really explain it,” replied Mr. Grosz. “It was just something that came and went. You know how it is with children. Yes, I daresay you *do* know, considering you've spent your life writing about them.”

I took credit for knowing how it is with children, knowing instead that Mr. Grosz was really talking about someone else, about *her*. Not to overdo this quaint notion of a split between my professional and my private personas, but at the time I was already quite self-conscious about the matter. While I was reading the Preston book to the kids, I had suffered the uncanny experience of having almost no recognition of my own words. Of course, this is rather a cliché with writers, and it has happened to me many times throughout my long career. But never so completely. They were the words of someone entirely alien to me. They were written by some other Alice. And I'm not her, at least not anymore.

“I do hope,” I said to Mr. Grosz, “that it wasn't the story that scared the child. I have enough angry parents on my hands as it is.”

“Oh, I'm sure it wasn't. Not that it wasn't a good scary children's story. I didn't mean to imply that, of course. But, you know, it's that time of year. Imaginary things are supposed to seem more real. Like your Preston. He was always a big one for Hallowe'en, am I right?”

I said he was quite right and hoped he would not pursue the subject. “Imaginary things” were not at all what I wanted to talk about just then. I tried to laugh it away. And you know, Father, for a moment it was exactly like your own laugh and not my hereditary impersonation of it.

Much to everyone's regret, I did not stay very long at the party. The reading had largely sobered me up, and my tolerance level was running quite low. Yes, Mr. Grosz, I promise to do it again next year, anything you say; just let me get back to my car and my bar.

The drive home through the suburban streets was something of an ordeal, a trip made unnerving as well as hazardous by pedestrian trick-or-treaters. The costumes did me no good. (The same ghost was everywhere, a lean little wraith that I imagined was following me home.) The masks did me no good. And those Prestonian shadows wavering against two-story façades (why did I have to choose *that* book?) certainly did me no good at all. Alice, the other one, could take all this madness, every nightmare her creator threw at her. That horrible Rev. Dodgson. I don't care if there is more in his books than anyone knows. I don't want to know. I wish I had never heard of him—that corrupter of little minds. I just want to forget it all. *Alice and the Disappearing Past*. Dr. Guardsman, administer your medicine in tall glasses... but please not looking-ones.

And now I'm safe at home with one of the tallest of those glasses resting full and faithful on my desk as I write. A lamp with a shade of Tiffany glass (circa 1922) casts its amiable light on the pages I've filled over the past few hours. (Though the hands of the clock seem locked in the same V position as when I started writing.) The lamplight shines upon the window directly in front of my desk, allowing me to see a relatively flattering reflection of myself in the black mirror of the glass. The house is soundless, and I'm a rich, retired authoress-widow.

Is there still a problem? I'm not really sure.

I remind you that I've been drinking steadily since early this afternoon. I remind you that I'm old and no stranger to the mysteries of geriatric neuroticism. I remind you that some part of me has written a series of children's books whose hero is a disciple of the bizarre. I remind you of what night this is and to what zones the imagination can fly on this hallowed eve. I need not, however, remind you that this world is stranger than we know, or at least mine seems to be, especially this past year. And I now notice that it's *very* strange—and, once again, untidy.

Exhibit One. Outside my window is an autumn moon hanging in the blackness. Now, I have to confess that I'm not up on lunar phases ("loony faces," as Preston might say), but there seems to have been a switch since I last looked out the window—the thing seems to have reversed itself. Where it used to be concaving to the right, it's now *convexing* in that direction, last quarter changed to first quarter, or something of that nature. But I doubt Nature has anything to do with it; more likely the explanation lies with Memory. So it's not the moon as such that's troubling me. The real trouble is with everything else, or at least what I can see of the suburban landscape in the street-lighted darkness. Like writing that can only be read in a mirror, the shapes outside my window —trees, houses, but thank goodness no people—now look awkward and wrong.

Exhibit Two. To the earlier list of reasons for my diminished competence, I would like to add an upcoming alcohol withdrawal. The last mouthful I guzzled from that glass on my desk tasted strangely vile, noxious to the point where I doubt I'll be having any more. I almost wrote, and now will, that the booze tasted inside out. Of course, there are certain

diseases with the power to turn the flavor of one's favorite drink into that of a hellbroth. Perhaps, then, I've fallen victim to such a malady. But I remind you that though my mind may be terminally soused, it has always resided *in corpore sano*.

Exhibit Three (the last). My reflection in the window before me. Perhaps something faulty in the melt of the glass. My face. The surrounding shadows seem to be overlapping it a little at a time, like bugs attracted to something sweet. But the only thing sweet about Alice is her blood, highly sugared over the years from her drinking habit. So what is it, then? Shadows of senility? Or those starving things I read about earlier this evening come back for a repeat performance? Since when does reading a story constitute an incantation calling up its imagery before the body's eyes and not the mind's?

Something's backward here. Backward into a corner: *checkmate*.

Now, perhaps this seems like merely a cry of wolf, however sincere I may be. I can't actually say that it isn't. I can't say that what I'm hearing right now isn't some Hallowe'en trick of my besotted brain.

The giggling out in the hallway, I mean. That demonic giggling I heard at the library. Even when I concentrate, I'm still not able to tell if the sound is inside or outside my head. It's like looking at one of those toy pictures that yield two distinct scenes when tilted this way or that, but, at a certain angle, form only a merging blur of them both. Nonetheless, the laughing is there, somewhere. And the voice is so familiar.

Aaaaa heh-heh-heh-heh-heh.

Exhibit Four (the shadows again). They're all over my face in the window. Stripping away, as in the story. But there's nothing under that old mask; no child's face there, Preston. It is you, isn't it? I've never heard your laughter, except in my mind. Yet that's exactly how I imagined it would sound. Or has my imagination given you, too, a hand-me-down, inherited laugh?

My only fear is that it isn't you but some impostor. The moon, the clock, the drink, the window. This is all very much your style, only it's not being done in fun, is it? It's not funny at all. Stop it, Preston, or whoever you are. And who is it? Who could be doing this? I've been good. I just got old, that's all. Please stop. The shadows in the window are coming out. No, not my face. Not my little moon face.

I can't see
anymore.
I can't see.
Help me
Father

Alice's Last Adventure (1989 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

First published in *Songs Of A Dead Dreamer*, 1985

> Preston, stop laughing. They ate the whole backyard. They ate your mother's favorite flowers! It's not funny, Preston."
> "Aaaaa ha-ha-ha-ha-ha. Aaaaa ha-ha-ha-ha-ha."

—PRESTON AND THE STARVING SHADOWS

A long time ago, Preston Penn made up his mind to ignore the passing years and join the ranks of those who remain forever in a kind of half-world between childhood and adolescence. He would not give up the bold satisfaction of eating insects (crispy flies and crunchy beetles are his favorites), nor that peculiar drunkenness of a child's brain, induplicable once grown-up sobriety has set perniciously in. The result was that Preston successfully negotiated several decades without ever coming within hailing distance of puberty; he lived unchanged throughout many a perverse adventure in the forties and fifties and even into the sixties. He lived long after I ceased writing about him.

Did he have a prototype? I should say so. One doesn't just *invent* a character like Preston using only the pitiful powers

of imagination. He was very much a concoction of reality, later adapted for my popular series of children's books.

Preston's status in both reality and imagination has always had a great fascination for me. In the past year, however, this issue has especially demanded my attention, not without some personal annoyance and even anxiety.

Then again, perhaps I'm just getting senile.

My age is no secret, since it can be looked up in a number of literary reference sources (see *Children's Authors of Today*) whose information is only a few years off—I won't tell you in which direction. Over two decades ago, when the last Preston book appeared (*Preston and the Upside-Down Face*), one reviewer rather snootily referred to me as the "*Grande Damned* of a particular sort of children's literature." What *sort* you can imagine if you don't otherwise know, if you didn't grow up—or not grow up, as it were—reading Preston's adventures with the Dead Mask, the Starving Shadows, or the Lonely Mirror.

Even as a little girl, I knew I wanted to be an author; and I also knew just the kinds of things I would write. Let someone else give the preadolescents their literary introductions to life and love, guiding them through those volatile years when *anything* might go wrong, and landing them safely on the shores of incipient maturity. That was never my destiny. I would write about my adventures with Preston—my real-life childhood playmate, as everybody knew. Preston would then initiate others into the mysteries of an upside-down, inside-out, sinistral, always faintly askew (if not entirely reversed) universe. A true avatar of topsy-turvydom, Preston gave himself body and soul to the search—in common places such as pools of rainwater, tarnished ornaments,

November afternoons—for zones of fractured numinosity, usually with the purpose of fracturing in turn the bizarre icons of his foul and bloated twin, the adult world. He became a conjurer of stylish nightmares, and what he could do with mirrors gave the grown-ups fits and sleepless nights. No dilettante of the extraordinary, but its embodiment. Such is the spiritual biography of Preston Penn.

But I suppose it was my father, as much as Preston's original, who inspired the stories I've written. To put it briefly, Father had the blood of a child coursing through his big adult body, nourishing the over-sophisticated brain of Foxborough College's associate professor of philosophy. Typical of his character was a love for the books of Lewis Carroll, and thus the genesis of my name, if not my subsequent career. (My mother told me that while she was pregnant, Father *willed* me into a little Alice.) Father thought of Carroll not merely as a clever storyteller but more as an inhumanly jaded aesthete of the imagination, no doubt projecting some of his own private values onto poor Mr. Dodgson. To him the author of the Alice books was, I think, a personal symbol of power, the strange ideal of an unstructured mind manipulating reality to its whim and gaining a kind of objective force through the minds of others.

It was very important that I share these books, and many other things, in the same spirit. "See, honey," he would say while rereading *Through the Looking Glass* to me, "see how smart little Alice right away notices that the room on the other side of the mirror is not as 'tidy' as the one she just came from. Not as *tidy*," he repeated with professorial emphasis but chuckling like a child, a strange little laugh that I inherited from him. "Not tidy. We know what *that* means,

don't we?" I would look up at him and nod with all the solemnity that my six, seven, eight years could muster.

And I did know what *that* meant. I felt intimations of a thousand discrete and misshapen marvels: of things going wrong in curious ways, of the edge of the world where an endless ribbon of road continued into space by itself, of a universe handed over to new gods. Father would gaze at my round little face, squinting his eyes as if I were giving off light. "Moon face," he called me. When I got older, my features became more angular, an involuntary betrayal of my father's conception of his little Alice, among all the other betrayals once I'd broken the barrier of maturity. I suppose it was a blessing that he did not live to see me grow up and change, saved from disappointment by a sudden explosion in his brain while he was giving a lecture at the college.

But perhaps he would have perceived, as I did not for many years, that my "change" was illusory, that I merely picked up the conventional gestures of an aging soul (nervous breakdown, divorce, remarriage, alcoholism, widowhood, stoic tolerance of a second-rate reality) without destroying the Alice he loved. She was always kept very much alive, though relegated to the role of an author for children. Obviously she endured, because it was she who wrote all those books about her soul mate Preston, even if she has not written one for many years now.

Not too many, I hope. Oh, those years, those years.

So much for the past.

At present I would like to deal with just a single year, the one ending today—about an hour from now, judging by the clock that five minutes ago chimed eleven p.m. from the shadows on the other side of this study. During the past

three hundred and sixty-five days I have noticed, sometimes just barely, an accumulation of peculiar episodes in my life. A lack of *tidiness*, you might say. (As a result, I've been drinking heavily again; and loneliness is getting to me in ways it never did in the past. Ah, the past.)

Some of these episodes are so elusive and insubstantial that it would be impossible to talk about them sensibly, except perhaps in the moods they leave behind like fingerprints, and which I've learned to read like divinatory signs. My task will be much easier if I confine myself to recounting but a few of the incidents, thereby giving them a certain form and structure I so badly need just now. A tidying up, so to speak.

I should start by identifying tonight as that sacred eve which Preston always devotedly observed, celebrating it most intensely in *Preston and the Ghost of the Gourd*. (At least there should be a few minutes remaining of this immovable feast, according to the clock ticking at my back; though from the look of things, the hands seem stuck on the time I reported a couple of paragraphs ago. Perhaps I misjudged it before.)

For the past several years I've made an appearance at the local suburban library on this night to give a reading from one of my books as the main event of an annual Hallowe'en fest. Tonight I managed to show up once again for the reading, even if I hesitate to say everything went as *usual*. Last year, however, I did not make it at all to the costume party. This brings me to what I *think* is the first in a yearlong series of disruptions unknown to a biography previously marked by nothing more than episodes of conventional chaos. My apologies for taking two steps backward before one step for-

ward. As an old hand at storytelling, I realize this is always a risky approach when bidding for a reader's attention. But here goes.

Around this time last year I attended the funeral of someone from my past, long past. This was none other than that sprite of special genius whose exploits served as the *prima materia* for my Preston Penn books. The gesture was one of pure nostalgia, for I hadn't actually seen this person since my twelfth birthday party. It was soon afterward that my father died, and my mother and I moved out of our house in North Sable, Mass, (see *Childhood Homes of Children's Authors* for a photo of the old two-story frame job), heading for the big city and away from sad reminders. A local teacher who knew of my work, and its beginnings in North S, sent me a newspaper clipping from the *Sable Sentinel*, that reported the demise of my former playmate and even mentioned his secondhand literary fame.

I arrived in town very quietly and was immediately overwhelmed by the lack of change in the place, as if it had existed all those years in a state of suspended animation and had been only recently reanimated for my benefit. It almost seemed that I might run into my old neighbours, schoolmates, and even Mr. So and So who ran the ice cream shop, which I was surprised to see still in operation. On the other side of the window, a big man with a walrus mustache was digging ice cream from large cardboard cylinders, while two chubby kids pressed their bellies against the counter. The man hadn't changed in the least over the years. He looked up and saw me staring into the shop, and there really seemed to be a twinkle of recognition in his puffy eyes. But that was impossible. He could have never perceived behind my an-

cient mask the child's face he once knew, even if he had been Mr. So and So and not his look-alike (son? grandson?). Two complete strangers gawking at each other through a window smeared with the sticky handprints of sloppy patrons. The scene depressed me more than I can say.

Unfortunately, an even more depressing reunion waited a few steps down the street. G. V. Ness and Sons, Funeral Directors. For all the years I'd lived in North Sable, this was only my second visit ("Good-bye, Daddy") to that cold colonial building. But such places always seem familiar, having that perfectly vacant, neutral atmosphere common to all funeral homes, the same in my hometown as in the suburb outside New York ("Good riddance, Hubby") where I'm now secluded.

I strolled into the proper room unnoticed, another anonymous mourner who was a bit shy about approaching the casket. Although I drew a couple of small-town stares, the elderly, elegant author from New York did not stand out as much as she thought she would. But with or without distinction, it remained my intention to introduce myself to the widow as a childhood friend of her deceased husband. This intention, however, was shot all to hell by two ox-like men who rose from their seats on either side of the grieving lady and lumbered my way. For some reason I panicked.

"You must be Dad's Cousin Winnie from Boston. The family's heard so much about you over the years," they said.

I smiled widely and gulped deeply, which must have looked like a nod of affirmation to them. In any case, they led me over to "Mom" and introduced me under my inadvertent pseudonym to the red-eyed, half-delirious old woman. (Why, I wonder, did I allow this goof to go on?)

“Nice to finally meet you, and thank you for the lovely card you sent,” she said, sniffing loudly and working on her eyes with a grotesquely soiled handkerchief. “I'm Elsie.”

Elsie Chester, I thought immediately, though I wasn't entirely sure that this was the same person who was rumored to have sold kisses and other things to the boys at North Sable Elementary. So he had married *her*, whaddaya know? Possibly they *had* to get married, I speculated cattily. At least one of her sons looked old enough to have been the consequence of teenage impatience. Oh, well. So much for Preston's vow to wed no one less than the Queen of Nightmares.

But even greater disappointments awaited my notice. After chatting emptily with the widow for a few more moments, I excused myself to pay my respects at the coffinside of the deceased. Until then I'd deliberately averted my gaze from that flower-crazed area at the front of the room, where a shiny, pearl-gray casket held its occupant in much the same position as the “Traveling Tomb” racer he'd once constructed. This part of the mortuary ritual never fails to put me in mind of those corpse-viewing sessions to which children in the nineteenth century were subjected in order to acquaint them with their own mortality. At my age this was unnecessary, so allow me to skip quickly over this scene with a few tragic and inevitable words.

Bald and blemished, that was unconsciously expected. *Totally* unfamiliar, that wasn't. The mosquito-faced child I once knew had had his features smushed and spread by the years—bloated, not with death but with having overfed himself at the turgid banquet of life, lethargically pushing away from the table just prior to explosion. A portrait of lazy indulgence. Defunct. Used up. The eternal adult. (But perhaps

in death, I consoled myself, a truer self was even now ripping off the false face of the thing before me. This must be so, for the idea of an afterworld populated with a preponderance of old, withered souls is too hideous to contemplate.)

After paying homage to the remains of a memory, I slipped out of that room with a stealth my Preston would have been proud of. I'd left behind an envelope with a modest contribution to the widow's fund. I had half a mind to send a batch of gaping black orchids to the funeral home with a note signed by Laetitia Simpson, Preston's dwarfish girlfriend. But this was something that the other Alice would have done, the one who wrote those strange books.

As for me, I got into my car and drove out of town to a nice big Holiday Inn near the interstate, where I found a nice suite—spoils of a successful literary career—and a bar. And as it turned out, this overnight layover must take us down another side road (or back road, if you like) of my narrative. Please stand by.

A late-afternoon crowd had settled into the hotel's barroom, relieving me of the necessity of drinking in total solitude, which at the time I was quite prepared to do. After a couple of Scotches on the rocks, I noticed a young man looking my way from the other side of that greenish room. At least he appeared young, extremely so, from a distance. But as I walked over to sit at his table, with a boldness I've never attributed to alcohol, he seemed to gain a few years with every step I took. He was now only relatively young—from an old dowager's point of view, that is. His name was Hank De Vere, and he worked for a distributor of gardening tools and other such products, in Maine. But let's not pre-

tend to care about the details. Later we had dinner together, after which I invited him to my suite.

It was the next morning, by the way, that inaugurated that yearlong succession of experiences which I'm methodically trying to sort out with a few select examples. Half step forward coming up: pawn to king three.

I awoke in the darkness peculiar to hotel bedrooms, abnormally heavy curtains masking the morning light. Immediately it became apparent that I was alone. My new acquaintance seemed to have a more developed sense of tact and timing than I had given him credit for. At least I thought so at first. But then I looked through the open doorway into the other room, where I could see a convex mirror in an artificial wood frame on the wall.

The bulging eye of the mirror reflected almost the entire next room in convexed perspective, and I noticed someone moving around in there. In the mirror, that is. A tiny, misshapen figure seemed to be gyring about, leaping almost, in a way that should have been audible to me. But it wasn't.

I called out a name I barely remembered from the night before. There came no answer from the next room, but the movement in the mirror stopped, and the tiny figure (whatever it was) disappeared. Very cautiously I got up from the bed, robed myself, and peeked around the corner of the doorway like a curious child on Christmas morning. A strange combination of relief and confusion arose in me when I saw that there was no one else in the suite.

I approached the mirror, perhaps to search its surface for the little *something* that might have caused the illusion. My memory is vague on this point, since at the time I was a bit hung over. But I can recall with spectacular vividness what I

finally saw after gazing into the mirror for a few moments. Suddenly the sphered glass before me became clouded with a mysterious fog, from the depths of which appeared the waxy face of a corpse. It was the visage of that old cadaver I'd seen at the funeral home, now with eyes open and staring reproachfully into mine...

Of course I really saw nothing of the kind. I did not even imagine it, except just now. But somehow this imaginary manifestation seems more fitting and conclusive than what I actually found in the mirror, which was only my old and haggard face... a corpselike countenance if ever there was one.

But there was another conclusion, let's say *encore*, to this episode with the mirror. A short while later I was checking out, and as the desk clerk was fiddling with my bill, I happened to look out of a nearby window, beyond which two children were romping on the lawn in front of the hotel: an arm-swinging, leaping mime show. After a few seconds the kids caught me watching them. They stopped and stared back at me, standing perfectly still, side by side... then suddenly they were running away. The room took a little spin that only I seemed to notice, while others went calmly about their business. Possibly this experience can be attributed to my failure to employ the usual post-debauch remedies that morning. The old nerves were somewhat shot, and my stomach was giving me no peace. Still, I've remained in pretty fair health over the years, all things considered, and I drove back home without further incident.

That was a year ago. (Get ready for one giant step forward: the old queen is now in play.)

In the succeeding months I noted a number of similar happenings, though they occurred with varying degrees of clarity. Most of them approached the fleeting nature of deja-vu phenomena. A few could be pegged as self-manufactured, while others lacked a definite source. I might see a phrase or the fragment of an image that would make my heart flip over (not a healthy thing at my age), while my mind searched for some correspondence that triggered this powerful sense of repetition and familiarity: the sound of a delayed echo with oblique origins. I delved into dreams, half-conscious perceptions, and the distortions of memory, but all that remained was a chain of occurrences with links as weak as smoke rings.

And today, one year later, this tenuous haunting has regained the clarity of the first incident at the hotel. Specifically I refer to a pair of episodes that have caused me to become a little insecure about my psychic balance and to attempt to confirm my lucidity by writing it all out. Organization is what's needed. Thus:

Episode One. Place: The Bathroom. Time: A Little After Eight a.m., the Last Day of October.

The water was running for my morning bath, cascading into the tub a bit noisily for my sensitive ears. The night before, I suffered from an advanced case of insomnia, which even extra doses of my beloved Guardsman's Reserve Stock did not help. I was very glad to see a sunny autumn morning come and rescue me. My bathroom mirror, however, would not let me forget the sleepless night I'd spent, and I combed and creamed myself without noticeable improvement. Sandal was with me, lying atop the toilet tank and scrutinizing the waters of the bowl below.

She was actually staring very hard and deliberately at something. I'd never seen a cat stare at its own reflection and have always been under the impression that they cannot see reflected images of themselves. (Lucky them!) But this one saw something. “What is it, Sandal?” I asked with the patronizing voice of a pet owner. Her tail had a life of its own; she stood up and hissed, then yowled in that horribly demonic falsetto of threatened felines. Finally she dashed out of the bathroom, relinquishing her ground for the first time in all my memory of her.

I had been loitering at the other side of the room, a groggy bystander to an unexpected scene. With a large plastic hairbrush gripped in my left hand, I investigated. I gazed down into the same waters, and though at first they seemed clear enough, something soon appeared from within that porcelain burrow. It had dozens of legs and looked all backward and inside out, but what was most disgusting about the thing was that it had a tiny human head, one like a baby's except all blue and shriveled.

This latter part, of course, is an exaggeration; or rather, it's an alarm without a fire. It helps if I can tack a neat storybook finish onto these episodes, because what seem to be their real conclusions just leave me hanging. You can't have stories end that way and still expect to hold your reader's esteem. Some genius once said that literature was invented the first time a certain boy cried “Wolf!” and there was none. I suppose this is what I'm doing now. Crying wolf. Not that it's my intention to make a fiction out of what is real. (Much too real, judging by my recent overdrinking and resultant late-night vomiting sessions.) But stories, even very nasty ones, are traditionally considered more satisfying than reality—

which, as we all know, is a grossly overrated affair. So don't worry about my cries of wolf. Even if it turns out that I'm making everything up, at least what you have left can be enjoyed as a story—no small value to my mind. It's just a different story, that's all: one about another old-lady author of children's yarns, which, incidentally, has nothing to do with the "truth" one way or the other.

So: Yes, I was in the bathroom, staring into the toilet bowl. The truth is that there was nothing in there, except nice, disinfected water of a bluish tint. The water was still, like a miniature lake, and cruelly reflected a miniature face. That's all I really saw, my hysterical kitty notwithstanding. I gazed at my wrinkled self in the magic pool for a few moments longer and then cocked the handle to flush it away. (You were right, Father, it doesn't pay to get old and ugly.)

I spent the rest of the morning lying around the baggy old suburban home my second husband left me when he died some years ago. An old war movie on television helped me pass the time. (And vain lady that I am, what I remember most about the war is the shortage of silk and other luxury items, like the quicksilver needed to make a mirror of superior reflective powers.)

In the afternoon I began preparing myself for the reading I was to give at the library, the preparation being mostly alcoholic. I've never looked forward to this annual ordeal and only put up with it out of a sense of duty, vanity, and other less comprehensible motives. Maybe this is why I welcomed the excuse to skip it last year. And I wanted to skip it this year, too, if only I could have come up with a reason satisfactory to the others involved—and, more importantly, to myself. Wouldn't want to disappoint the children, would I?

Of course not, though heaven only knows why. Children have made me nervous ever since I stopped being one of them. Perhaps this is why I never had any of my own—adopted any, that is, for the doctors told me long ago that I'm about as fertile as the seas of the moon.

The other Alice is the one who's really comfortable with kids and kiddish things. How else could she have written *Preston and the Laughing This* or *Preston and the Twitching That*? So when it comes time to do this reading every year, I try to put her onstage as much as possible, something that's becoming more difficult with the passing years. Oddly enough, it's my grown-up's weakness for booze that allows me to do this most effectively. Each drink I had this afternoon peeled away a few more winters, and soon I was ready to confront the most brattish child without fear. Which leads me to introduce:

Episode Two. Place: The Car in the Driveway. Time: A Radiant Twilight.

With a selection of Preston stories on the seat beside me (I was still undecided on which to read, hoping for inspiration), I was off to do my duty at the library. A routine adjustment of the rearview mirror straightened the slack-mouthed angle it had somehow assumed since I'd last driven the car. The image I saw in the mirror was also routine. Across the street and staring into my car by way of the rear window was the odious and infinitely old Mr. Thompson. (Worse than E. Nesbit's U. W. Ugli, let me assure you.)

He seemed to appear out of nowhere, for I hadn't seen him when I was getting into the car. But there he was now, ogling the back of my head. This was quite normal for the lecherous old boy, and I didn't think anything of it. While I

was adjusting the mirror, however, a strange little trick took place. I must have hit the switch that changes the position of the mirror for night driving, flipping it back and forth very quickly like the snap of a camera. So what I saw for an instant was a nighttime, negative version of Mr. Thompson as he stood there with his hands deep in his trousers pockets. What a horrendous idea. The unappealingly lubricious Thompson on this side of reality is bad enough without *anti*-Thompsons running around and harassing me for dates. (Thank goodness there's only one of everybody, I thought.) I didn't pull out of the driveway until I saw Thompson move on down the sidewalk, which he did after a few moments, leaving me to stare at my own shriveled eye sockets in the rearview mirror.

The sun was going down in a pumpkin-colored blaze when I arrived at the little one-story library. Some costumed kids were hanging around outside: a werewolf, a black cat with a long curling tail, and what looked like an Elvis Presley, or at least some teen idol of a bygone age. And coming up the walk were two identical Tinkerbells, who I later found out were Tracy and Trina Martin. I had forgotten about twins. So much for the comforting notion that there's only one of everybody.

I was actually feeling quite confident, even as I entered the library and suddenly found myself confronted with a huddling mass of youngsters. But then the spell was broken maliciously when some anonymous smart aleck called out from the crowd, saying: “Hey, lookit the mask *she*'s wearing.” After that I propelled myself down several glossy linoleum hallways in search of a friendly adult face. (Someone

should give that wisecracker a copy of *Struwwelpeter*; let him see what happens to his kind of kid.)

Finally I passed the open door of tidy little room where a group of ladies and the head librarian, Mr. Grosz, were sipping coffee. Mr. Grosz said how nice it was to see me again and introduced me to the moms who were helping out with the party.

“My William's read all your books,” said a Mrs. Harley, as if she were relating a fact to which she was completely indifferent. “I can't keep him away from them.”

I didn't know whether or not to thank her for this comment, and ended up replying with a dignified and slightly liquorish smile. Mr. Grosz offered me some coffee and I declined: bad for the stomach. Then he wickedly suggested that, as it was starting to get dark outside, the time seemed right for the festivities to begin. My reading was to inaugurate the evening's fun, a good spooky story “to get everyone in the mood.” First, though, I needed to get myself in the mood, and discreetly retired to a nearby ladies’ room where I could refortify my fluttering nerves. Mr. Grosz, in one of the strangest and most embarrassing social gestures I've ever witnessed, offered to wait right outside the lavatory until I finished.

“I'm quite ready now, Mr. Grosz,” I said, glaring down at the little man from atop an unelderly pair of high heels. He cleared his throat, and I almost thought he was going to extend a crooked arm for me to take. But instead, he merely stretched it out, indicating the way to an old woman who might not see as well as she once did.

He led me back down the hallway toward the children's section of the library, where I assumed my reading would

take place as it always had in the past. However, we walked right by this area, which was dark and ominously empty, and proceeded down a flight of stairs leading to the library's basement. "Our *new* facility," bragged Mr. Grosz. "Converted one of the storage rooms into a small auditorium of sorts." Down at the end of the hallway, two large green doors faced each other on opposite walls. "Which one will it be tonight?" asked Mr. Grosz while staring at my left hand. "*Preston and the Starving Shadows*," I answered, showing him the book I was holding. He smiled and confided that it was one of his favorites. Then he opened the door to the library's new facility.

Over fifty kids were sitting (quietly!) in their seats. At the front of the long, narrow room, a big witch was outlining the party activities for the night; and when she saw Mr. Grosz and me enter, she began telling the children about a "special treat for us all," meaning that the half-crocked lady author was about to give her half-cocked oration. Walking a very straight line to the front, I took the platform and thanked everyone for that nice applause—most of it, in fact, coming from the sweaty hands of Mr. Grosz. On the platform was a lampbearing podium decorated with wizened cornstalks. I fixed my book in place before me, disguising my apprehension with a little stage patter about the story everyone was going to hear. When I invoked the name of Preston Penn, a few kids actually cheered, or at least one did. Just as I was ready to begin reading, however, the lights went out, which was rather unexpected. And for the first time I noticed that facing each other on opposite sides of the room were two rows of jack-o'-lanterns shining bright orange and yellow in the darkness. They all had identical faces—trian-

gular eyes and noses, wailing O's for mouths—and could have been mirror reflections of themselves. (As a child, I was convinced that pumpkins naturally grew this way, complete with facial features and phosphorescent insides.) Furthermore, they seemed to be suspended in space, darkness concealing their means of support. Since that darkness also prevented my seeing the faces of the children, these jack-o'-lanterns became my audience.

But as I read, the real audience asserted itself with giggles, whispers, and some rather ingenious noises made with the folding wooden chairs they were sitting in. At one point, toward the end of the reading, there came a low moan from somewhere in the back, and it sounded as if someone had fallen out of his seat. "It's all right," I heard an adult voice call out. The door at the back opened, allowing a moment of brightness to break the spooky spell, and some shadows exited. When the lights came on at the end of the story, one of the seats toward the back was missing its occupant.

"Okay, kids," said the big witch after some minor applause for Preston, "everyone move their chairs back to the walls and make room for the games and stuff."

The games and stuff had the room in a low-grade uproar. Masked and costumed children ruled the night, indulging their appetite for movement, sweet things to eat and drink, and noise. I stood at the periphery of the commotion and chatted with Mr. Grosz.

"What exactly was the disturbance all about?" I asked him.

He took a sip from a plastic cup of cider and smacked his lips offensively. "Oh, nothing, really. You see that child there with the black-cat outfit? She seemed to have fainted. Not

entirely, of course. Once we got her outside, she was all right. She was wearing her kitty mask all through your reading, and I think the poor thing hyperventilated or something like that. Complained that she saw something horrible in her mask and was very frightened for a while. At any rate, you can see she's fine now, and she's even wearing her mask again. Amazing how children can put things right out of their minds and recover so quickly."

I agreed that it was amazing, and then asked precisely what it was the child thought she saw in her mask. I couldn't help being reminded of another cat earlier in the day who also saw something that gave her a fright.

"She couldn't really explain it," replied Mr. Grosz. "You know how it is with children. Yes, I daresay you *do* know how it is with them, considering you've spent your life exploring the subject."

I took credit for knowing how it is with children, knowing instead that Mr. Grosz was really talking about someone else, about *her*. Not to overdo this quaint notion of a split between my professional and my private personas, but at the time I was already quite self-conscious about the matter. While I was reading the Preston book to the kids, I had suffered the uncanny experience of having almost no recognition of my own words. Of course, this is rather a cliché with writers, and it has happened to me many times throughout my long career. But never so completely. They were the words of a mind (I stop just short of writing soul) entirely alien to me. This much I would like to note in passing, never to be mentioned again.

"I do hope," I said to Mr. Grosz, "that it wasn't the story that scared the child. I have enough angry parents on my

hands as it is."

"Oh, I'm sure it wasn't. Not that it wasn't a good scary children's story. I didn't mean to imply that, of course. But you know, it's that time of year. Imaginary things are supposed to seem more real. Like your Preston. He was always a big one for Hallowe'en, am I right?"

I said he was quite right and hoped he would not pursue the subject. The reality of fictional characters was not at all what I wanted to talk about just then. I tried to laugh it away. And you know, Father, for a moment it was exactly like your own laugh, and not my usual hereditary impersonation of it.

Much to everyone's regret, I did not stay very long at the party. The reading had largely sobered me up, and my tolerance level was running quite low. Yes, Mr. Grosz, I promise to do it again next year, anything you say; just let me get back to my car and my bar.

The drive home through the suburban streets was something of an ordeal, made hazardous by pedestrian trick-or-treaters. The costumes did me no good. (The same ghost was everywhere.) The masks did me no good. And those Prestonian shadows fluttering against two-story façades (why did I have to choose *that* book?) certainly did me no good at all. This was not my place anymore. Not my style. Dr. Guardsman, administer your medicine in tall glasses... but please not looking-ones.

And now I'm safe at home with one of the tallest of those glasses resting full and faithful on my desk as I write. A lamp with a shade of Tiffany glass (circa 1922) casts its amiable glow on the many pages I've filled over the past few hours. (Although the hands of the clock seem locked in the same V

position as when I started writing.) The lamplight shines upon the window directly in front of my desk, allowing me to see a relatively flattering reflection of myself in the black mirror of the glass. The house is soundless, and I'm a rich, retired authoress-widow.

Is there still a problem? I'm really not sure.

I remind you that I've been drinking steadily since early this afternoon. I remind you that I'm old and no stranger to the mysteries of geriatric neuroticism. I remind you that some part of me has written a series of children's books whose hero is a disciple of the bizarre. I remind you of what night this is and to what zone the imagination can fly on this particular eve. (But we can discount this last one, owing to my status as an elderly cynic and disbeliever.) I need not, however, remind you that this world is stranger than we know, or at least mine seems to be, especially this past year. And I now notice that it's very strange—and, once again, untidy.

Exhibit One. Outside my window is an autumn moon hanging in the blackness. Now, I have to confess that I'm not up on the lunar phases ("loony faces," as Preston might say), but there seems to have been a switch since I last peeked out the window—the thing looks reversed. Where it used to be concaving to the right, it's now con*vex*ing in that direction, last quarter changed to first quarter, or something of that nature. But I doubt Nature has anything to do with it; more likely the explanation lies with Memory. And there's really not much troubling me about the moon, which, even if reversed, would still look as neat as a storybook illustration. The trouble is with everything else below, or at least what I can see of the suburbanscape in the darkness. Like writing

that can only be read in a mirror, the shapes outside my window—trees, houses, but thank goodness no people—now look awkward and wrong.

Exhibit Two. To the earlier list of reasons for my diminished competence, I would like to add an upcoming alcohol withdrawal. The last sip I took out of that glass on my desk tasted indescribably strange, to the point where I doubt I'll be having any more. I almost wrote, and now will, that the booze tasted inside out. Of course, there are certain diseases with the power to turn the flavor of one's favorite drink into that of a hellbroth. So perhaps I've fallen victim to such a malady. But I remind you that although my mind may be terminally soused, it has always resided *in corpore sano*.

Exhibit Three (the last). My reflection in the window before me. Perhaps something unusual in the melt of the glass. My face. The surrounding shadows seem to be overlapping it a little at a time, like bugs attracted to something sweet. But the only thing sweet about Alice is her blood, highly sugared over the years from her drinking habit. So what is it, then? Shadows of senility? Or those starving things I read about earlier this evening come back for a repeat performance, another in a yearlong series of echoes? But whenever that happens, it's always the reflection, the warped or imaginary image first... and then the real-life echo. Since when does reading a story constitute an incantation calling up its imagery before the body's eyes and not the mind's?

Something's backward here. Backward into a corner: *checkmate*.

Now, perhaps this seems like merely another cry of wolf, the most elaborate one so far. I can't actually say that it isn't.

I can't say that what I'm hearing right now isn't some Hallowe'en trick of my besotted brain.

The laughing out in the hallway, I mean. That childish chuckling. Even when I concentrate, I'm still not able to tell if the sound is inside or outside my head. It's like looking at one of those toy pictures that yield two distinct scenes when tilted this way or that, but, at a certain angle, form only a merging blur of them both. Nonetheless, the laughing is there, somewhere. And the voice is extremely familiar. Of course, it is. No, it isn't. Yes, it is, it is!

Aaaaa ha-ha-ha-ha-ha.

Ex. 4 (the shadows again). They're all over my face in the window. Stripping away, as in the story. But there's nothing under that old mask; no child's face there, Preston. It *is* you, isn't it? I've never heard your laughter, except in my imagination, but that's exactly how I imagined it sounds. Or has my imagination given you, too, a hand-me-down, inherited laugh?

My only fear is that it isn't you but some impostor. The moon, the clock, the drink, the window. This is all very much your style, only it's not being done in fun, is it? *It's not funny*. Too horrible for me, Preston, or whoever you are. And who is it? Who could be doing this to a harmless old lady? Too horrible. The shadows in the window. No, not my face.

I cant see anymore I cant see

Help me

Father

Notes on the Writing of Horror: A Story (2010 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

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For much too long I have been promising to formulate my views on the writing of supernatural horror tales. Yet I've continued to put off doing so. All I can say for myself is that until now I just haven't had the time. Why not? I was too busy churning out the leetle darlings. But many people, for whatever reasons, would like to be writers of horror tales and crave advice on how to go about it. I know this. Fortunately, the present moment is a convenient one for me to share my knowledge and experience regarding this special literary vocation. Well, I guess I'm ready as I'll ever be. Let's get it over with.

The way I plan to proceed is quite simple. First, I'm going to sketch out the basic plot, characters, and various other features of a short horror story. Next, I will offer suggestions on how these raw elements may be treated in a few of the major styles which horror authors have exploited over the years. If all goes well, the novice teller of terror tales will be saved much time and agony puzzling out such things for himself. At certain spots along the way I will examine specifics of technique, come to highly biased conclusions regard-

ing intents and purposes, submit general commentary on the philosophy of horror fiction, and so forth.

At this point I would like to state that what follows is a rough draft of a story that in its finished form was meant to appear in the published works of Gerald K. Riggers (myself in literary guise if you didn't know). However, it never came to fruition. Frankly, I just couldn't bring myself to go the distance with this one. Such things happen. Perhaps farther down the line we'll analyze such cases of irreparable failure, perhaps not. Regardless, the bare elements of this narrative are still suitable for demonstrating how horror writers do what they do. Good. Here it is, then, as told in my own words.

The Story

A thirtyish male protagonist, let's name him Nathan, has a date with a girl whom he deeply wishes to impress. Toward this end, a minor role is to be played by an impressive new pair of trousers he intends to find and purchase. A few obstacles materialize along the way, realistic inconveniences all, before he finally manages to secure this item of apparel, and at a fair price. They are first-rate in their tailoring, this is quite evident. So far, so good. Profoundly good, to be sure, since Nathan believes that one's personal possessions should themselves possess particular qualities and pedigrees. For example, Nathan's overcoat is a handsome and well-fabricated garment he special ordered from an esteemed retailer of fine clothes, his wristwatch is the superior timepiece his grandfather bequeathed to him, and his car is a distinguished but not obtrusive vehicle. For Nathan, peculiar essences inhere not only in certain possessions but also in cer-

tain places, certain happenings in time and space, and certain modes of being. In Nathan's view, every facet of one's life should shine with these essences because they are what make an individual really real. What are these essences? Over a period of time, Nathan has narrowed them down to three: something magical, something timeless, and something profound. Though the world around him is for the most part lacking in these special ingredients, he perceives his own life to contain them in fluctuating but acceptable quantities. His new trousers certainly do; and Nathan hopes, for the first time in his life, that a future romance—to be conducted with one Lorna McFickel—will too.

So far, so good. Until the night of Nathan's first date, that is.

Miss McFickel resides in a respectable suburb but, in relation to where Nathan lives, the locale of her home requires that he negotiate one of the most dangerous sectors of the city. No problem: Nathan keeps his car well maintained. If he just keeps the doors locked and windows rolled up, everything will be fine. Worst luck, broken bottles on a broken street, and a flat tire. Nathan curbs the car. He removes his grandfather's watch and locks it in the glove compartment; he takes off his overcoat, folds it up neatly, and snuggles it into the shadows beneath the dashboard. As far as the trousers are concerned, he would simply have to exercise great care while attempting to change his tire in record time, and in a part of town known as Hope's Back Door.

Now, all the while Nathan is fixing the tire, his legs feel strange. He could attribute this to the physical labor he was performing in a pair of trousers not exactly designed for such abuse. He would just have been fooling himself,

though. For Nathan remembers his legs feeling strange, though less noticeably, when he tried on the trousers at home. They didn't feel that way at the clothing store. If they had, he would never have purchased them. He would also have returned them if his date with Lorna McFickel hadn't been scheduled too soon for him to find another pair of trousers as fitting as these, which turned out to be not fitting in the least once they began going strange on him. But strange how? Strange as in being a little tingly, and even then some. A little quivery. Nonsense, he's just nervous about his date with lovely Lorna. And the complications he's presently experiencing are no help.

Adding to the troubles Nathan has already had, two scraggly juveniles are now watching him change the tire. He tries to ignore them but succeeds a little too well in this. Unseen by him, one of the ostensible delinquents edges toward the car and opens the front door. Worst luck, Nathan forgot to lock it. The audacious hoodlum lays his hands on Nathan's overcoat, and then both no-goodniks disappear into a tumbledown building.

Very quickly now. Nathan chases the hooligans into what seems to be an untenanted apartment house, and he falls down some stairs leading to a sooty basement. But it's not that the stairs were rotten, no. It is that Nathan's legs have given out. They just won't work anymore. The tingling and quivering have now penetrated him and crippled his body from the waist down. He tries to remove his pants but they won't come off, as if they had become part of him. Something has gone horribly wrong because of those pants of his. The following is why. A few days before Nathan purchased the pants, they were returned to the store for a cash refund.

The woman returning them said that her husband didn't like the way they felt, which was true. Also true was that her husband had collapsed and died from a heart attack not long after trying on the pants. In an endeavor to salvage what she could from the tragedy, the woman put her husband into a pair of old dungarees before making another move. Poor Nathan, of course, was not informed of his pants' sordid past. And when the hooligans who stole his overcoat see that he is lying helpless in the grime of that basement, they decide to take advantage of the situation and strip him of his valuables... starting with those expensive-looking slacks and whatever treasures they may contain. But after they relieve a protesting and paralyzed Nathan of his pants, they do not further pursue their pillaging. Not after they see Nathan's legs, which are the putrid members of a man who is decomposing. With the lower half of Nathan rapidly rotting away, the upper must also die among the countless shadows of that condemned building. And mingled with the pain and madness of his untimely demise, Nathan abhors and grieves over the thought that, for a while anyway, Miss McFickel will think he has stood her up on the first date of what was supposed to be a long line of dates destined to evolve into a magical, timeless, and profound affair of two hearts.

Incidentally, this story, had it reached its culmination, would most likely have borne the title "Romance of a Dead Man."

The Styles

As I've already stated, there is more than one way to write a horror story. And such a statement, true or false, is easily demonstrated. In this section we will examine the

three primary techniques that authors have employed to produce tales of terror. They are: the *realistic* technique, the *traditional Gothic* technique, and the *experimental* technique. Each serves its user in different ways and realizes different ends, there's no question about that. After a little soul-searching, the prospective horror writer may awaken to the right technique for attaining his personal ends. Thus:

The realistic technique. Since the cracking dawn of consciousness, restless tongues have asked: is the world, and are its people, real? Yes, answers realistic fiction, but only when it is, and they are, normal. The supernatural, and all it represents, is profoundly abnormal, and therefore unreal. Few would argue with these conclusions. Fine. Now the highest aim of the realistic horror writer is to prove, in realistic terms, that the unreal is real. The question is: “Can this be done?” The answer is: “Of course not.” One would look silly attempting such a thing. Consequently, the realistic horror writer, wielding the hollow proofs and premises of his art, must settle for merely *seeming* to smooth out the ultimate paradox. In order to achieve this effect, the supernatural realist must really know the normal world, and deeply take for granted its reality. (It helps if he himself is normal and real.) Only then can the unreal, the abnormal, the supernatural be smuggled in as a plain brown package marked Hope, Love, or Fortune Cookies, and postmarked: the Edge of the Unknown. And of the dear reader's seat. In the end, of course, the supernatural explanation of a given story depends entirely on some irrational principle which in the real, normal world looks as awkward and stupid as a rosy-cheeked farm lad in a den of reeking degenerates. (Amend this, possibly, to rosy-cheeked degenerate... reeking farm

lads.) Nevertheless, the hoax can be pulled off with varying degrees of success. That much is obvious. Just remember to assure the reader, at certain points in the tale and by way of certain signals, that it's now all right to believe the unbelievable. Here's how Nathan's story might be told using the *realistic* technique. Fast forward.

Nathan is a normal and real character, or at least one very close to being so. Perhaps he's not as normal and real as he would like to be, but he does have his sights set on just this goal. He might even be a little too intent on it, though without passing beyond the limits of the normal and the real. We have established that Nathan has a fetish for things "*magical*" (which word should really have its own pair of quotes, given that the positive connotation our protagonist intends it to carry will be negated by the end of the narrative, when a world of bad magic comes down on Nathan's head), "*timeless*" (again the quotes, because if time runs out for anyone, it's Nathan), and "*profound*" (hmm, this one has a knottiness about it that the others don't. "Magical" and "timeless" have a cheaply ironic connection to the incidents of the story. However, "profound" doesn't work in this way. This "essence" does have an aura about it, though, at least for this writer. For now, then, we'll let it stand.).

Nathan's search for the aforesaid qualities in his life may be somewhat uncommon, but certainly not abnormal, not unreal. (And to make him a bit more real, one could supply his overcoat, his grandfather's wristwatch, and his car with specific brand names, perhaps autobiographically borrowed from one's own closet, wrist, and garage.) The triadic formula which haunts Nathan—similar to the Latinate slogans on family coats-of-arms—also haunts the text of the tale like

a song's refrain, possibly in italics as the submerged chanting of our anti-hero's under-mind, possibly not. (Try not to be too artificial; one recalls this is realism.) Nathan wants his romance with Lorna McFickel, along with everything else he considers of value in existence, to be magical, timeless, and, in some vague sense, profound. To Nathan these are attributes that are really normal and really real in a helter-skelter universe where things are ever threatening to go abnormal and unreal on one, anyone, not just him.

Okay. Now Lorna McFickel represents all the virtues of normalcy and reality. She could be played up in the *realistic* version of the story as much more normal and real than Nathan. Maybe Nathan is after all quite the neurotic; maybe he needs normal and real things too much, I don't know. (If I did, maybe I could have written the story.) Whatever, Nathan wants to win a normal, real love, but he doesn't. He loses, even before he has a chance to play. He loses badly. Why? For the answer we can appeal to a very prominent theme in horror stories: be careful what you wish for, because you will certainly get the contrary. What happened was that Nathan got greedy. He wanted something that human existence does not offer—perfection. And to highlight this reality, certain *outside* supernatural forces were brought in to teach Nathan, and the reader, a lesson. (Realistic horror stories can be very didactic.) But how can such things be? This is really what a supernatural horror story, even a realistic one, is all about. In just what way, amid all the realism of Nathan's life, does the supernatural sneak past Inspectors Normal and Real standing guard at the gate? Well, sometimes it steps softly by inches until it has crashed the party.

Now in Nathan's story the source of the supernatural is somewhere inside those mysterious trousers. They are woven of a material which he has never seen the like of; they have no label to indicate their maker; there are no others like them in the store of a different size or color. When Nathan asks the salesman about them, we introduce Exhibit One: the trousers were received as if providentially by the clothier Nathan patronizes. They were not designated to be among the batch of apparel with which they came, the salesman checks. And no one else in the store at the time can tell Nathan anything about them, which is also checked and double-checked. All of these facts make the pants a total mystery in a totally realistic way. The reader now takes the hint that there is something surpassing strange about the pants and will allow that strangeness to extend into the supernatural.

At this point the alert student may ask: but even if the trousers are acknowledged as magical, why do they have the particular effect they eventually have, causing Nathan to rot away below the waist? To answer this question we need to introduce Exhibit Two: Nathan is not the original owner of the pants. Not long before they became one of his magical, timeless, and profound possessions, they were worn by a man whose wife adhered to the rule “waste not, want not” and removed the brand new pants he was wearing when he keeled over and died. But these “facts” explain nothing, right? Of course they don't. However, they may seem to explain everything if they are revealed in the right manner. All one has to do is link up the Exhibits One and Two (there may even be more) within the scheme of a realistic narrative.

For example, Nathan might find something in the trousers that leads him to deduce that he is not their original owner. Perhaps he finds a winning lottery ticket of a significant, though not too tempting, amount. Being a normally honest type of person, Nathan calls the clothes store, explains the situation, and they dig up the name and phone number of the gentleman who originally purchased those pants, and, afterward, returned them, or had them returned —the signature on the return form is hard to read (how realistic). Quite possibly the lottery ticket belonged to him. Nathan makes another phone call—not minding that the pants had a previous owner because they are so perfect for his plans—and finds out that the pants were returned not by a man, but by a woman. The very same woman who explains to Nathan that she and her husband, never mind the massive coronary, could really use the modest winnings from that lottery ticket.

By now the reader's mind is no longer on the lottery ticket, but on the revealed fact that Nathan is the owner and future wearer of a pair of pants that seems to have already killed once, and who knows how many other times—thus associating them with impermanence and decay, evils woven into the frustrating fabric of life, evils sent out under various covers (pants, pens, Christmas toys) to cut their recipients down to size because they tried to go against the ways of the world. And so when almost-real, almost-normal Nathan loses all hope of achieving full normalcy and reality, the reader knows why: wrong time, wrong pants, and wrong expectations from a life that has no sense of what we think should be normal and real.

The *realistic* technique.

It's easy. Now try it yourself.

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The traditional Gothic technique. Certain kinds of people, and *a fortiori* certain kinds of writers, have always experienced the world around them in the Gothic manner, I'm almost positive. Perhaps there was even some little stump of an apeman who witnessed prehistoric lightning as it parried with prehistoric blackness in a night without rain, and felt his soul rise and fall at the same time to behold this sublime and terrifying conflict. Perhaps such displays provided inspiration for those very first imaginings that were not born of our daily life of crude survival, who knows? Could this be why all our primal mythologies are Gothic—that is, fearsome, fantastical, and inhuman? I only pose the question, you see. Perhaps the forbidding events of triple-volume shockers passed, in abstract, through the brains of hairy, waddling things as they moved around in moon-trimmed shadows during their angular migrations across lunar landscapes of craggy peaks or skeletal wastelands of jagged ice. Such ones did not doubt there was a double world of the fearsome, the fantastical, and the inhuman, for nothing needed to flaunt its reality before their eyes as long as it *felt* real to their blood. A gullible bunch of creatures, these. And to this day the fearsome, the fantastical, and the inhuman retain a firm grip upon our souls. So much goes without saying, really.

Therefore, the advantages of the *traditional Gothic* technique, even for the contemporary writer, are two. One, isolated supernatural incidents don't look as silly in a Gothic tale as they do in a realistic one, since the latter obeys the

hard-knocking school of reality while the former recognizes only the University of Dreams. (Of course the entire Gothic tale itself may look silly to a given reader, but this is a matter of temperament, not technical execution.) Two, a Gothic tale gets under a reader's skin and stays there far more insistently than other kinds of stories. Of course it has to be done right, whatever you take the words *done right* to mean. Do they mean that Nathan has to function within the monumental incarceration of a castle in the mysterious fifteenth century? No, but he may function within the monumental incarceration of a castle-like skyscraper in the just-as-mysterious modern world. Do they mean that Nathan must be a brooding Gothic hero and Miss McFickel an ethereal Gothic heroine? No, but it may mean an extra dose of obsessiveness in Nathan's psychology, and Miss McFickel may seem to him less the ideal of normalcy and reality than the pure Ideal itself. Contrary to the realistic story's allegiance to the normal and the real, the world of the Gothic tale is fundamentally unreal and abnormal, harboring essences which are magical, timeless, and profound in a way the realistic Nathan never dreamed. So, to do right by a Gothic tale, let's be frank, requires that the author be a militant romantic who relates the action of his narratives in dreamy and more than usually emotive language. Hence, the well-known grandiose rhetoric of the Gothic tale, which may be understood by the sympathetic reader as not just an inflatable raft on which the imagination floats at its leisure upon waves of bombast, but also as the sails of the Gothic artist's soul filling up with the winds of ecstatic hysteria. So it's hard to tell someone how to write the Gothic tale, since one really has to be born to the task. Too bad. The most one can do is offer a pertinent ex-

ample: a Gothic scene from “Romance of a Dead Man,” translated from the original Italian of Geraldo Riggerini. This chapter is entitled “The Last Death of Nathan.”

> Through a partially shattered window, its surface streaked with a blue film of dust that thrilled the soul with a sublime sense of desolation, the diluted glow of twilight seeped down onto the basement floor where Nathan lay without hope of a saving mobility. In the dark you're not anywhere, he had thought as a child bundled beneath his bedcovers, his sight lost in night's enveloping cloak; and, in the bluish semi-luminescence of that stone cellar, Nathan was truly not anywhere where eyes could see aught but a gloomy fate. With agonizing labor, he raised himself upon one elbow, squinting through tears of confusion into the grimy azure dimness. He now appeared as would a patient who has been left alone in a doctor's surgery, anxiously looking around to see if he had been forgotten on that frigid table. If only his legs would move as they once did, if only that paralyzing pain would suddenly become cured. Where were those wretched doctors, he asked himself deliriously. Ah, there they were, standing behind the turquoise haze of the surgery lamps. “He's out of it, man,” said one of them to his colleague. “We can take everything he's got on him.” But after they removed Nathan's trousers, the operation was unceremoniously terminated and the patient abandoned in the blue shadows of silence. “Jesus, look at his legs,” they screamed. Oh, if only he could now scream like that, Nathan thought

> among all the fatal chaos of his other thoughts. If only he could scream loud enough to be heard by that angelic girl, by way of apologizing for his permanent absence from their magical, timeless, and profound future, which was in fact as defunct as the two legs putrefying before his eyes. Couldn't he now emit such a scream, now that the tingling anguish of his liquefying legs was beginning to course throughout his whole being? But no. It was impossible—to scream that loudly—though he did manage, at length, to scream himself straight to death.

The *traditional Gothic* technique.
It's easy if you're right for the job. Try it yourself and see.

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The experimental technique. Every story needs to be told in just the right way. And sometimes that way is puzzling to the public. In the business of storytelling there's really no such thing as experimentalism in its trial-and-error sense. A story is not an experiment, an experiment is an experiment. True. The “experimental” writer, then, is simply following the story's commands to tell it in the right way, puzzling or not. The writer is not the story, the story is the story. See?

The question we now must ask is: is Nathan's the kind of horror story that demands treatment outside the conventional realistic or Gothic techniques? Well, it may be, if only for the purpose of these “notes.” Since I've pretty much given up on “Romance of a Dead Man,” I guess there's no harm in giving another turn of the screw to its bare-bones narrative, even if it's in the wrong direction. Here's the way

mad Dr. Riggers would experiment, blasphemously, with his man-made Nathanstein. The secret of life, my ugly Igors, is time... time... time.

The experimental version of this story could actually be told as two stories happening “simultaneously,” each narrated in alternating sections which take place in parallel chronologies. One section begins with the death of Nathan and moves backward in time, while its counterpart story begins with the death of the original owner of the magical pants and moves forward. Needless to say, the facts in the case of Nathan must be juggled around so as to be comprehensible from the beginning, that is to say from the end. (Don't risk confusing your worthy readers.) The stories converge at the crossroads of the final section where the destinies of two characters also converge, this being the clothes store where Nathan purchases the fateful trousers. On his way into the store he bumps into someone who is preoccupied with counting a handful of cash, this being the woman who has returned the trousers which have been already placed back on the rack.

“Excuse me,” says Nathan.

“Look where you're going,” says the woman.

Of course at this point in time we have already seen where Nathan is going and what “magical” and “profound” trouble he gets himself into as he circles in a “timeless” narrative loop.

The *experimental* technique.

It's easy. Now try it yourself.

Another Style

All the styles we have just examined have been simplified for the purposes of instruction, haven't they? Each is a purified example of its kind, let's not kid ourselves. In the real world of horror fiction, however, the above three techniques often get entangled with one another in hopelessly strange ways, almost to the point of rendering my previous discussion of them useless for all practical purposes. But an ulterior purpose, which I'm saving for later, may thus be better served. Before we get there, though, I'd like, briefly, to propose still another style.

The story of Nathan is one very close to my heart and I hope, in its basic trauma, to the hearts of many others. I wanted to write this horror tale in such a fashion that its readers would be distressed not by the isolated catastrophe of Nathan but by the very existence of a world where such catastrophe is possible. I wanted to forge a tale that would conjure a mournful universe independent of time, place, and persons. The characters of the story would be Death itself in the flesh, Desire in a new pair of pants, Desiderata within arm's reach, and Doom in a size to fit all.

I couldn't do it, my friends. What I took on was the writing of a story that, for *my* intents and purposes, would be consummately profound. (There, now I've given away my reason for listing this property among Nathan's three essences.) But I simply didn't have it in me to put it all together.

It's not easy, and I don't suggest that you try it yourself.

The Final Style

Now that we are nearing the conclusion of these notes, it is time to reveal my own prejudice concerning how a horror

story should be written. It is my view, and this is only an opinion, mind you, that horror has a voice proper to itself. But what is it? Is it that of an old storyteller, keeping eyes wide around the tribal campfire; is it that of a documentarian of current or historical happenings, reporting events heard-about and conversations overheard; is it even that of a yarn-spinning god who can see the unseeable and narrate, from an omniscient perspective, a scary set of incidents for his reader's entertainment? All things considered, I contend that it is none of these voices, nor is it any of the others we have analyzed up to this point. Instead, so I say, it is a lonely voice calling out in the middle of the night. Sometimes it's muffled, like the voice of a tiny insect crying for help from inside a sealed coffin, and other times the coffin shatters, like a brittle exoskeleton, and from within rises a piercing, crystal shriek that lacerates the midnight blackness. In other words, the proper voice of horror is really that of the *personal confession*.

If you will humor me for a time, I'll try to explain the proposition that I have just advanced. Horror is not really horror unless it's *your* horror—that which you have known personally. You may not be able to get it out in a consummately profound way, but this is where true horror writing must start. And what makes it true is that the confessing narrator always has something he must urgently get off his chest and labors beneath its nightmarish weight all the while he is telling the tale. Nothing could be more obvious, I argue, except perhaps that the tale teller, ideally, should himself be a writer of horror fiction, if not by trade then at least by temperament. That really is more obvious. Better. But how can the *confessional* technique be applied to the story

we've been working with? Its hero isn't a horror writer, at least not that I can see. Clearly some adjustments have to be made.

As the reader may have noticed, Nathan's character can be altered to suit a variety of literary styles. He can lean toward the normal in one and the abnormal in another. He can be transformed from a realistic person to an experimental abstraction. He can play any number of basic human and nonhuman roles, representing just about anything a writer could want. Mostly, though, I wanted Nathan, when I first conceived him and his ordeal, to represent none other than my real life self. For behind my pseudonymic mask of Gerald Karloff Riggers, I am none other than Nathan Jeremy Stein.

So it's not too farfetched that in his story Nathan should be a horror writer who wishes to relate, via the route of supernatural fiction, the awful vicissitudes of his own experience. Perhaps he dreams of achieving Gothic glory by writing tales that are nothing less than magical, timeless, and the other thing. He is already an ardent consumer of the abnormal and the unreal: a haunter of spectral marketplaces, a visitant of discount houses of unreality, a bargain hunter in the deepest basement of the unknown. And somehow he comes to procure his dream of horror without even realizing what it is he's bought or with what he has bought it. Like the other Nathan, *this* Nathan eventually finds that what he's bought is not quite what he bargained for—a pig in a poke rather than a nice pair of pants.

What? I'll explain.

In the confessional version of Nathan's horror story, the main character must be provided with something shocking to confess, something befitting his persona as a die-hard

freak of all things fearsome, fantastical, and inhuman. The solution is quite obvious. Nathan will confess his realization that he is up to his eyeballs in the aberrations of HORROR. He's had a predilection for this path since he can remember, and maybe even earlier than that. In other words, Nathan is not a normal boy, nor a real one.

The turning point in Nathan's biography as a man (or thing) of horror, as in previous accounts, is an aborted fling with Lorna McFickel. In the other versions of the story, the character known by this name is a personage of shifting significance, representing at turns the ultra-real or the super-ideal to her would-be romancer. The confessional version of "Romance of a Dead Man," however, gives her a new identity, namely that of Lorna McFickel herself, who lives across the hall from me in a Gothic castle of high-rise apartments, twin-towered and honeycombed with newly carpeted passageways. But otherwise there's not much difference between the female lead in the fictional story and her counterpart in the factual one. While the storybook Lorna will remember Nathan as the creep who spoiled her evening, who disappointed her—Real Lorna, Normal Lorna feels exactly the same way, or rather felt, since I doubt she even thinks about the one she called *the most disgusting creature on the face of the earth*. And though these hyperbolic words were spoken in the heat of a very hot moment, I believe her attitude was sincere. Notwithstanding, I will never reveal the motivation for this outburst of hers, not even under the pain of torture. Character motivation is not important to this horror story anyway, or not nearly as important as what happens to Nathan following Lorna's revelatory rejection.

For he now finds out that his unwholesome nature is not just a fluke of psychology, and that, as a fact, supernatural influences have been governing his life all along, that he is subject only to the rule of demonic forces, which now want this expatriate from the pit of shadows back in their embracing arms. In brief, Nathan should never have been born a human being, a truth he must accept. Hard. And he knows that someday the demons will come for him.

The height of the crisis comes one evening when the horror writer's spirits are at low ebb. He has attempted to express his supernatural tragedy in a short horror story, his last, but he just can't reach a climax of suitable intensity and imagination, one that would do justice to the cosmic scale of his pain. He has failed to embody in words his semi-autobiographical sorrow, and all these games with protective names have only made it more painful. It hurts to hide his heart within pseudonyms of pseudonyms. Finally, the horror writer, while sitting at his writing desk, begins bawling all over the manuscript of his unfinished story. This goes on for quite some time, until Nathan's sole want is to seek a human oblivion in a human bed. Whatever its drawbacks, grief is a great sleeping draught to drug oneself into a noiseless, lightless paradise far from an agonizing universe. This is so.

A little later, someone is knocking, impatiently rapping really, on Nathan's apartment door. Who is it? One must answer to find out.

“Here, you forgot these,” a pretty girl said to me, flinging a woolly bundle into my arms. Just as she was about to walk away, she turned and scanned the features of my face a little more scrupulously. I have sometimes impersonated other people, the odd Norman and even a Nathan or two, and that

night I put on the mask once more. “I'm sorry,” she said. “I thought you were Norman. This is his apartment, right across and one down the hall from mine.” She pointed to show me. “Who're you?”

“I'm a friend of Norman,” I answered.

“Oh, I guess I'm sorry then. Well, those're his pants I threw at you.”

“Were you mending them or something?” I asked innocently, checking them as if looking for the scars of repair.

“No, he just didn't have time to put them back on the other night when I threw him out, you know what I mean? I'm moving out of this creepy dump just to get away from him, and you can tell him those words.”

“Please come in from that drafty hallway and you can tell him yourself.”

I smiled my smile and she, not unresponsively, smiled hers. I closed the door behind her.

“So, do you have a name?” she asked.

“Penzance,” I replied. “Call me Pete.”

“Well, at least you're not Harold Wackers, or whatever the name is on those lousy books of Norman's.”

“I believe it's *Wickers*, H. J. Wickers.”

“Anyway, you don't seem anything like Norman, or even someone who'd be a friend of his.”

“I'm sure that was intended as a compliment, from what I've gathered about you and Norman. Actually, though, I too write books not unlike those of H. J. Wickers. My apartment across town is being painted, and Norman was kind enough to take me in, even loan me his desk for a while.” I manually indicated the weeped-upon object of my last remark. “In fact, Norman and I sometimes collaborate under a common

pen-name, and right now we're working together on a project.”

“That's nice, I'm sure,” she said. “By the way. I'm Laura —”

“O'finney,” I finished. “Norman's spoken quite highly of you.”

“Where is the creep, anyway?” she inquired.

“He's sleeping,” I answered, lifting a finger toward the rear section of the apartment. “We've been hard at work on a new story, but I could wake him up.”

The girl's face assumed a disgusted expression.

“Forget it,” she said, heading for the door. Then she turned and very slowly walked a little ways back toward me. “Maybe we'll see each other again.”

“Anything is possible,” I assured her.

“Just do me a favor and keep Norman away from me, if you don't mind.”

“I think I can do that very easily. But first you have to do something for me.”

“What?”

I leaned toward her very confidentially.

“Please die, Desiderata,” I whispered in her ear, while gripping her neck with both hands, cutting short a scream along with her life. Then I really went to work.

—

“Wake up, Norman,” I shouted. I was standing at the foot of his bed, my hands positioned behind my back. “You were really dead to the world, you know that?”

A little drama took place on Norman's face in which astonishment overcame sleepiness and both were vanquished

by anxiety. He had been through a lot the past couple nights, laboring over our “notes” and other things, and really needed some rest.

“Who? What do you want?” he said, quickly sitting up in bed.

“Never mind what I want. Right now we are concerned with what *you* want. Remember what you told that girl the other night? Remember what you wanted her to do that got her so upset?”

“So that's it. You're a friend of Laura. Well, you can just get the hell out of here or I'm calling the cops.”

“That's what *she* said, too, remember? And then she said she wished she had *never met you*. And that was the line, wasn't it, that gave you the inspiration for our fictionalized adventure. Poor Nathan never had the chance you had. Nice work, thinking up those enchanted trousers. When the real reason—”

“Are you deaf? Get out of my apartment!” he yelled. But he calmed down somewhat when he saw that ferocity in itself had no effect on me.

“What did you expect from that girl? You did tell her that you wanted to entwine bodies with… what was it? Oh yes, a headless woman. Like that decapitated specter you read about in an old Gothic novel long years past. I would imagine that the illustration in that book only inflamed your fixation. I guess Laura didn't understand that in the spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of… *headless apparitions*. Headless. You told her you had the whole costume back at your place, if I correctly recall. Well, my lad, I've got the answer to your prayers. How's this for headless?” I said, holding up the head from behind my back.

He didn't make a sound, though his eyes screamed madly at what he saw. I tossed the long-haired and bloody noggin in his lap. In a blink, he threw the bedcovers over it and frantically pushed the whole business onto the floor with his feet.

“The rest of the body is in the bathtub if you want to have a go at it. I'll wait.”

I can't say for sure, but for a passing moment he seemed to be thinking about it. He stayed put in his bed, however, and didn't make a move or say a word for a minute or so. When he finally did speak, each syllable came out calm and smooth. It was as if one part of his mind had broken off from the rest, and it was this part that now addressed me.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“Do you really need a name, and would it do you any good? Should we call that disengaged head down there Laura or Lorna, or just plain Desiderata? And what in the name of perdition should I call you—Norman or Nathan, Harold or Gerald?”

“I thought so,” he said disgustedly. Then he continued in that eerily rational voice, but very rapidly. He did not even seem to be talking to anyone in particular. “Since the thing to which I am speaking,” he said, “since this thing knows what only I could know, and since it tells me what only I could tell myself, I must therefore be completely alone in this room. Perhaps I'm dreaming. Yes, dreaming. Otherwise the diagnosis is insanity. Very true. Profoundly certain. Go away now, Mr. Madness. Go away, Dr. Dream. You made your point, now let me sleep. I'm through with you.”

Then he lay his head down on the pillow and closed his eyes.

“Norman,” I said. “Do you always go to bed with your trousers on?”

He opened his eyes and now noticed what he had not before. He sat up again.

“Very good, Mr. Madness. These look like the real thing. But that's not possible since Laura still has them, sorry about that. Funny, they won't come off. The imaginary zipper must be stuck. I guess I'm in trouble now. I'm a dead man if there ever was one, hoo. Always make sure you know what you're buying, that's what I say. Heaven help me, please. You never know what you might be getting yourself into. Come off, damn you! Well, so when do I start to rot, Mr. Madness? Are you still there? What happened to the lights?”

The lights had gone out in the room and everything glowed with a bluish luminescence. Lightning began flashing outside the bedroom window, and thunder resounded in the midst of a rainless night. Through an aperture in the clouds shone a moon that only beings of another world can see. Puppet-shadows played upon its silvery screen.

“Rot your way back to us, you quirk of creation. Rot your way out of this world. Come home to a hell so excruciating it is bliss itself.”

“Is this really happening to me? I mean, I'm doing my best, sir. But it isn't easy. Some kind of electrical charge making me all shivery down there. It feels as if I'm dissolving. Oh, it hurts, my love. Ah, ah, ah. What a way to end to a miserable life, turning to mush. Can you help me, Dr. Dream?”

I could feel myself changing form, shuffling off that human suit I was wearing. Bony wings began rising out of my back, and I saw them spread gloriously in the blue mirror

before me. My eyes were now jewels, hard and radiant. My jaws were a cavern of dripping silver and through my veins ran rivers of putrescent gold. He was writhing on the bed like a wounded insect, making sounds like nothing human. I swept him up and wrapped my sticky arms again and again around his trembling body. He was laughing like a child, the child of another world. And a great wrong was about to be rectified.

I signaled the windows to open onto the night, and, very slowly, they did. His childlike laughter had now turned to tears, but they would soon run dry, I knew this. At last we would be free to live magically, timelessly beyond the pull of the earth. The windows opened wide over the city below and, in a manner of speaking, the profound blackness above welcomed us.

I had never tried this before.

But when the time came, I found it all so easy.

Notes on the Writing of Horror: A Story (1989 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

First published in *Dark Horizons* #28, 1985

For much too long I have been promising to formulate my views on the writing of supernatural horror tales. Until now I just haven't had the time. Why not? I was too busy churning out the leetle darlings. But many people, for whatever reasons, would like to be writers of horror tales, I know this. Fortunately, the present moment is a convenient one for me to share my knowledge and experience regarding this special literary vocation. Well, I guess I'm ready as I'll ever be. Let's get it over with.

The way I plan to proceed is quite simple. First, I'm going to sketch out the basic plot, characters, and various other features of a short horror story. Next, I will offer suggestions on how these raw elements may be treated in a few of the major styles which horror writers have exploited over the years. Each style is different and has its own little tricks. This approach will serve as an aid in deciding which style is the right one and for whom. And if all goes well, the novitiate teller of terror tales will be saved much time and agony discovering such things for himself. We'll pause at certain spots along the way to examine specific details, make highly

biased evaluations, submit general commentary on the philosophy of horror fiction, and so forth.

At this point it's only fair to state that the following sample story, or rather its rough outline form, is not one that appears in the published works of Gerald K. Riggers, nor will it ever appear. Frankly, for reasons we'll explore a little later, I just couldn't find a way to tell this one that really satisfied me. Such things happen. (Perhaps farther down the line we'll analyze these extreme cases of irreparable failure, perhaps not.) Nevertheless the unfinished state of this story does not preclude using it as a perfectly fit display model to demonstrate how horror writers do what they do. Good. Here it is, then, as told in my own words. A couple-three paragraphs, at most.

THE STORY

A thirtyish but still quite youthful man, let's name him Nathan, has a date with a girl whom he deeply wishes to impress. Toward this end, a minor role is to be played by an impressive new pair of trousers he intends to find and purchase. A few obstacles materialize along the way, petty but frustrating bad luck, before he finally manages to secure the exact trousers he needs and at an extremely fair price. They are exceptional in their tailoring, this is quite plain. So far, so good. Profoundly good, to be sure, since Nathan intensely believes that one's personal possessions should themselves possess a certain substance, a certain quality. For example, Nathan's winter overcoat is the same one his father wore for thirty winters; Nathan's wristwatch is the same one his grandfather wore going on four decades, in all seasons. For Nathan, peculiar essences inhere in certain items of apparel,

not to mention certain other articles small and large, certain happenings in time and space, certain people, and certain notions. In Nathan's view, yes, every facet of one's life should shine with these essences which alone make things really real. What are they? Nathan, over a period of time, has narrowed the essential elements down to three: something magic, something timeless, something profound. Though the world around him is for the most part lacking in these special ingredients, he perceives his own life to contain them in fluctuating but usually acceptable quantities. His new trousers certainly do; and Nathan hopes, for the first time in his life, that a future romance—to be conducted with one Lorna McFickel—will too.

So far, so good. Luckwise. Until the night of Nathan's first date. Miss McFickel resides in a respectable suburb but, in relation to where Nathan lives, she is clear across one of the most dangerous sectors of the city. No problem: Nathan's ten-year-old car is in mint condition, top form. If he just keeps the doors locked and the windows rolled up, everything will be fine. Worst luck, broken bottles on a broken street, and a flat tire. Nathan curbs the car. He takes off his grandfather's watch and locks it in the glove compartment; he takes off his father's overcoat, folds it up neatly, and snuggles it into the shadows beneath the dashboard. As far as the trousers are concerned, he would simply have to exercise great care while attempting to change his flat tire in record time, and in a part of town known as Hope's Back Door. With any luck, the trousers would retain their triple traits of magicality, timelessness, and profundity. Now, all the while Nathan is fixing the tire, his legs feel stranger and stranger. He could have attributed this to the physical labor

he was performing in a pair of trousers not exactly designed for such abuse, but he would have just been fooling himself. For Nathan remembers his legs feeling strange, though less noticeably so, when he first tried on the trousers at home. Strange how? Strange as in a little stiff, and even then some. A little funny. Nonsense, he's just nervous about his date with lovely Lorna McFickel.

To make matters worse, two kids are now standing by and watching Nathan change the tire, two kids who look like they recently popped up from a bottomless ash pit. Nathan tries to ignore them, but he succeeds a little too well in this. Unseen by him, one of the kids edges toward the car and opens the front door. Worst luck, Nathan forgot to lock it. The kid lays his hands on Nathan's father's coat, and then both kids disappear into a rundown apartment house.

Very quickly now, Nathan chases the kids into what turns out to be a condemned building, and he falls down the stairs leading to a lightless basement. It's not that the stairs were rotten, no. It *is* that Nathan's legs have finally given out; they just won't work anymore. They are very stiff and feel funnier than ever. And not only his legs, but his entire body below the waist... except, for some reason, his ankles and feet. They're fine. For the problem is not with Nathan himself. It's with those pants of his. The following is why. A few days before Nathan purchased the pants, they were returned to the store for a cash refund. The woman returning them claimed that her husband didn't like the way they felt. She lied. Actually, her husband couldn't have cared less how the pants felt, since he'd collapsed from a long-standing heart ailment not long after trying them on. And with no one home to offer him aid, he died. It was only after he had lain several hours

dead in those beautiful trousers that his unloving wife came home and, trying to salvage what she could from the tragedy, put her husband into a pair of old dungarees before making another move. Poor Nathan, of course, was not informed of his pants' sordid past. And when the kids see that he is lying helpless in the dust of that basement, they decide to take advantage of the situation and strip this man of his valuables... starting with those expensive-looking slacks and whatever treasures they may contain. But after they relieve a protesting, though paralyzed Nathan of his pants, they do not pursue their pillagery any further. Not after they see Nathan's legs, which are the putrid members of a man many days dead. With the lower half of Nathan rapidly rotting away, the upper must also die among the countless shadows of that condemned building. And mingled with the pain and madness of his untimely demise, Nathan abhors and grieves over the thought that, for a while anyway, Miss McFickel will think he has stood her up on the first date of what was supposed to be a long line of dates destined to evolve into a magic and timeless and profound affair of two hearts... .

Incidentally, this story was originally intended for publication under my perennial pen name, G. K. Riggers, and entitled: "Romance of a Dead Man."

THE STYLES

There is more than one way to write a horror story, so much one expects to be told at this point. And such a statement, true or false, is easily demonstrated. In this section we will examine what may be termed three primary techniques of terror. They are: The *realistic* technique, the *traditional Gothic* technique, and the *experimental* technique. Each serves its user in different ways and realizes different ends,

there's no question about that. After a little soul-searching, the prospective horror writer may awaken to exactly what his ends are and arrive at the most efficient technique for handling them. Thus...

The realistic technique. Since the cracking dawn of consciousness, restless tongues have asked: is the world, and are its people, real? Yes, answers realistic fiction, but only when it is, and they are, normal. The supernatural, and all it represents, is profoundly abnormal, and therefore unreal. Few would argue with these conclusions. Fine. Now the highest aim of the realistic horror writer is to prove, in realistic terms, that the unreal is real. The question is, can this be done? The answer is, of course not: one would look silly attempting such a thing. Consequently the realistic horror writer, wielding the hollow proofs and premises of his art, must settle for merely *seeming* to smooth out the ultimate paradox. In order to achieve this effect, the supernatural realist must really know the normal world, and deeply take for granted its reality. (It helps if he himself is normal and real.) Only then can the unreal, the abnormal, the supernatural be smuggled in as a plain brown package marked Hope, Love, or Fortune Cookies, and postmarked: the Edge of the Unknown. And of the dear reader's seat. Ultimately, of course, the supernatural explanation of a given story depends entirely on some irrational principle which in the real, normal world looks as awkward and stupid as a rosy-cheeked farm lad in a den of reeking degenerates. (Amend this, possibly, to rosy-cheeked degenerate... reeking farm lads.) Nevertheless, the hoax can be pulled off with varying degrees of success, that much is obvious. Just remember to assure the reader, at certain points in the tale and by way of

certain signals, that it's now all right to believe the unbelievable. Here's how Nathan's story might be told using the realistic technique. Fast forward.

Nathan is a normal and real character, sure. Perhaps not as normal and real as he would like to be, but he does have his sights set on just this goal. He might even be a little too intent on it, though without passing beyond the limits of the normal and the real. His fetish for things “magic, timeless, and profound” may be somewhat unusual, but certainly not abnormal, not unreal. (And to make him a bit more real, one could supply his coat, his car, and grandfather's wristwatch with specific brand names, perhaps autobiographically borrowed from one's own closet, garage, and wrist.) The triple epithet which haunts Nathan's life—similar to the Latinical slogans on family coats-of-arms—also haunts the text of the tale like a song's refrain, possibly in italics as the submerged chanting of Nathan's undermind, possibly not. (Try not to be too artificial, one recalls this is realism.) Nathan wants his romance with Lorna McFickel, along with everything else he considers of value in existence, to be magic, timeless, and the other thing. For, to Nathan, these are attributes that are really normal and really real in an existence ever threatening to go abnormal and unreal on one, anyone, not just him.

Okay. Now Lorna McFickel represents all the virtues of normalcy and reality. She could be played up in the realistic version of the story as much more normal and real than Nathan. Maybe Nathan is just a little neurotic, maybe he needs normal and real things too much, I don't know. Whatever, Nathan wants to win a normal, real love, but he doesn't. He loses, even before he has a chance to play. He loses badly. Why? For the answer we can appeal to a very

prominent theme in the story: Luck. Nathan is just unlucky. He had the misfortune to brush up against certain outside supernatural forces and they devastated him body and soul. But *how* did they devastate him, this is really what a supernatural horror story, even a realistic one, is all about.

Just how, amid all the realism of Nathan's life, does the supernatural sneak past Inspectors Normal and Real standing guard at the gate? Well, sometimes it goes in disguise. In realistic stories it is often seen impersonating two inseparable figures of impeccable reputation. I'm talking about Dr. Cause and Prof. Effect. Imitating the habits and mannerisms of these two, not to mention taking advantage of their past record of reliability, the supernatural can be accepted in the best of places, be unsuspiciously abandoned on almost any doorstep—not the bastard child of reality but its legitimized heir. Now in Nathan's story the source of the supernatural is somewhere inside those mysterious trousers. They are woven of some fabric which Nathan has never seen the like of; they have no labels to indicate their maker; there is something indefinably alluring in their makeup. When Nathan asks the salesman about them, we introduce our *first cause*: the trousers were made in a foreign land—South America, Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia—which fact clarifies many mysteries, while also making them even more mysterious. The realistic horror writer may also allude to well-worn instances of sartorial magic (enchanted slippers, invisible making jackets), though one probably doesn't want the details of this tale to be overly explicit. Don't risk insulting your gentle reader.

At this point the alert student may ask: but even if the trousers are acknowledged as magic, why do they have the

particular effect they eventually have, causing Nathan to rot away below the waist? To answer this question we need to introduce our *second cause*: the trousers were worn, for several hours, by a dead man. But these "facts" explain nothing, right? Of course they don't. However, they may seem to explain everything if they are revealed in the right manner. All one has to do is link up the first and second causes (there may even be more) within the scheme of a realistic narrative. For example, Nathan might find something in the trousers leading him to deduce that he is not their original owner. Perhaps he finds a winning lottery ticket of significant, though not too tempting, amount. (This also fits in nicely with the theme of luck.) Being a normally honest type of person, Nathan calls the clothes store, explains the situation, and they give him the name and phone number of the gentleman who originally put those pants on his charge account and, afterward, returned them. Nathan puts in the phone call and finds out that the pants were returned not by a man, but by a woman. The very same woman who explains to Nathan that since her husband has passed on, rest his soul, she could really use the modest winnings from that lottery ticket. By now Nathan's mind, and the reader's, is no longer on the lottery ticket at all, but on the revealed fact that Nathan is the owner and future wearer of a pair of pants once owned (and worn? it is interrogatively hinted) by a *dead man*. After a momentary bout with superstitious repellence, Nathan forgets all about the irregular background of his beautiful, almost new trousers. The reader, however, doesn't forget. And so when almost-real, almost-normal Nathan loses all hope of achieving full normalcy and reality, the reader knows why, and in more ways than one.

The *realistic* technique.

It's easy. Now try it yourself.

The traditional Gothic technique. Certain kinds of people, and a fortiori certain kinds of writers, have always experienced the world around them in the Gothic manner, I'm almost positive. Perhaps there was even some little stump of an ape-man who witnessed prehistoric lightning as it parried with prehistoric blackness in a night without rain, and felt his soul rise and fall at the same time to behold this cosmic conflict. Perhaps such displays provided inspiration for those very first imaginings that were not born of the daily life of crude survival, who knows? Could this be why all our primal mythologies are Gothic? I only pose the question, you see. Perhaps the labyrinthine events of triple-volumed shockers passed, in abstract, through the brains of hairy, waddling things as they moved around in moon-trimmed shadows during their angular migrations across lunar landscapes of craggy rock or skeletal wastelands of jagged ice. These ones needed no convincing, for nothing needed to *seem* real to their little minds as long as it *felt* real to their blood. A gullible bunch of creatures, these. And to this day the fantastic, the unbelievable, remains potent and unchallenged by logic when it walks amid the gloom and grandeur of a Gothic world. So much goes without saying, really.

Therefore, the advantages of the *traditional Gothic* technique, even for the contemporary writer, are two. One, isolated supernatural incidents don't look as silly in a Gothic tale as they do in a realistic one, since the latter obeys the hard-knocking school of reality while the former recognizes only the University of Dreams. (Of course the entire Gothic tale itself may look silly to a given reader, but this is a matter

of temperament, not technical execution.) Two, a Gothic tale gets under a reader's skin and stays there far more insistently than other kinds of stories. Of course it has to be done right, whatever you take the words *done right* to mean. Do they mean that Nathan has to function within the massive incarceration of a castle in the mysterious fifteenth century? No, but he may function within the massive incarceration of a castlelike skyscraper in the just-as-mysterious twentieth. Do they mean that Nathan must be a brooding Gothic hero and Miss McFickel an ethereal Gothic heroine? No, but it may mean an extra dose of obsessiveness in Nathan's psychology, and Miss McFickel may seem to him less the ideal of normalcy and reality than the pure Ideal itself. Contrary to the realistic story's allegiance to the normal and the real, the world of the Gothic tale is fundamentally unreal and abnormal, harboring essences which are magic, timeless, and profound in a way the realistic Nathan never dreamed. So, to rightly do a Gothic tale requires, let's be frank, that the author be a bit of a lunatic, at least while he's authoring, if not at all times. Hence, the well-known inflated rhetoric of the Gothic tale can be understood as more than an inflatable raft on which the imagination floats at its leisure upon the waves of bombast. It is actually the sails of the Gothic artist's soul filling up with the winds of ecstatic hysteria. And these winds just won't blow in a soul whose climate is controlled by central air-conditioning. So it's hard to tell someone how to write the Gothic tale, since one really has to be born to the task. Too bad. The most one can do is offer a pertinent example: a Gothic scene from “Romance of a Dead Man,” translated from the original Italian of Geraldo

Riggerini. This chapter is entitled “The Last Death of Nathan.”

Through a partially shattered window, its surface streaked with a blue film of dust and age, the diluted glow of twilight seeped down onto the basement floor where Nathan lay without hope of mobility. In the dark you're not anywhere, he had thought as a child at each and every bedtime; and, in the bluish semiluminescence of that stone cellar, Nathan was truly not anywhere. He raised himself up on one elbow, squinting through tears of confusion into the filthy azure dimness. His grotesque posture resembled the half-anesthetized efforts of a patient who has been left alone for a moment while awaiting surgery, anxiously looking around to see if he's simply been forgotten on that frigid operating table. If only his legs would move, if only that paralyzing pain would suddenly become cured. Where were those wretched doctors, he asked himself dreamily. Oh, there they were, standing behind the turquoise haze of the surgery lamps. “He's out of it, man,” said one of them to his colleague. “We can take everything he's got on him.” But after they removed Nathan's trousers, the operation was abruptly terminated and the patient abandoned in the blue shadows of silence. “Jesus, look at his legs, look,” they had screamed. Oh, if only he could now scream like that, Nathan thought among all the fatal chaos of his other thoughts. If only he could scream loud enough to be heard by that girl, by way of apologizing for his permanent absence from their magic, timeless, and profound future, which was in fact as defunct as the two legs that now seemed to be glowing glaucous with putrefaction before his eyes. Couldn't he now emit such a scream, now that the tingling agony of his liquefying legs was beginning to spread upward throughout his whole body and being? But no. It was im-

possible—to scream that loudly—though he did manage, in no time at all, to scream himself straight to death.

The *traditional Gothic* technique.

It's easy. Now try it yourself.

The *experimental technique*. Every story, even a true one, wants to be told in only one single way by its writer, yes? So, really, there's no such thing as experimentalism in its trial-and-error sense. A story is not an experiment, an experiment is an experiment. True. The "experimental" writer, then, is simply following the story's commands to the best of his human ability. The writer is not the story, the story is the story. See? Sometimes this is very hard to accept, and sometimes too easy. On the one hand, there's the writer who can't face his fate: that the telling of a story has nothing at all to do with him; on the other hand, there's the one who faces it too well: that the telling of the story has nothing at all to do with him. Either way, literary experimentalism is simply the writer's imagination, or lack of it, and feeling, or absence of same, thrashing their chains around in the escape-proof dungeon of the words of the story. One writer is trying to get the whole breathing world into the two dimensions of his airless cell, while the other is adding layers of bricks to keep that world the hell out. But despite the most sincere efforts of each prisoner, the sentence remains the same: to stay exactly where they are, which is where the story is. It's a condition not unlike the world itself, except it doesn't hurt. It doesn't help either, but who cares?

The question we now must ask is: is Nathan's the kind of horror story that demands treatment outside the conventional realistic or Gothic techniques? Well, it may be, depending on whom this story occurred to. Since it occurred to

me (and not too many days ago), and since I've pretty much given up on it, I guess there's no harm in giving this narrative screw another turn, even if it's in the wrong direction. Here's the way mad Dr. Riggers would experiment, blasphemously, with his man-made Nathanstein. The secret of life, my ugly Igors, is time... time... time.

The experimental version of this story could actually be told as two stories happening "simultaneously," each narrated in alternating sections which take place in parallel chronologies. One section begins with the death of Nathan and moves backward in time, while its counterpart story begins with the death of the original owner of the magic pants and moves forward. Needless to say, the facts in the case of Nathan must be juggled around so as to be comprehensible from the beginning, that is to say from the end. (Don't risk confusing your worthy readers.) The stories converge at the crossroads of the final section where the destinies of their characters also converge, this being the clothes store where Nathan purchases the fateful trousers. On his way into the store he bumps into a woman who is preoccupied with counting a handful of cash, this being the woman who has just returned the trousers.

"Excuse me," says Nathan.

"Look where you're going," says the woman at the same instant.

Of course at this point we have already seen where Nathan is going and, in a way too spooky to explain right now, so has he.

The experimental technique. It's easy, now try it yourself.

ANOTHER STYLE

All the styles we have just examined have been simplified for the purposes of instruction, haven't they? Each is a purified example of its kind, let's not kid ourselves. In the real world of horror fiction, however, the above three techniques often get entangled with one another in hopelessly mysterious ways, almost to the point where all previous talk about them is useless for all practical purposes. But an ulterior purpose, which I'm saving for later, may thus be better served. Before we get there, though, I'd like, briefly, to propose still another style.

The story of Nathan is one very close to my heart and I hope, in its basic trauma, to the hearts of many others. I wanted to write this horror tale in such a fashion that its readers would be distressed not by the personal, individual catastrophe of Nathan but by his very existence in a world, even a fictional one, where a catastrophe of this type and magnitude is possible. I wanted to employ a style that would conjure all the primordial powers of the universe independent of the conventional realities of the Individual, Society, or Art. I aspired toward nothing less than a pure style without style, a style having nothing whatever to do with the normal or abnormal, a style magic, timeless, and profound... and one of great horror, the horror of a god. The characters of the story would be Death himself in the flesh, Desire in a new pair of pants, the pretty eyes of Desiderata and the hideous orbs of Loss. And linked hand-in-hand with these terrible powers would be the more terrible ones of Luck, Fate, and all the miscellaneous minions of Doom.

I couldn't do it, my friends. It's not easy, and I don't suggest that you try it yourself.

THE FINAL STYLE

Dear horror writers of the future, I ask you: what is the style of horror? What is its tone, its *voice*? Is it that of an old storyteller, keeping eyes wide around the tribal campfire; is it that of a documentarian of current or historical happenings, reporting events heard-about and conversations overheard; is it even that of a yarn-spinning god who can see the unseeable and reveal, from viewpoint omniscient, the horrific hearts of man and monster? I have to say that it's none of these, sorry if it's taken so long.

To tell you the truth, I'm not sure myself what the voice of horror really is. But throughout my career of eavesdropping on the dead and the damned, I know I've heard it; and Gerry Riggers, you remember him, has tried to put it on paper. Most often it sounds to me very simply like a voice calling out in the middle of the night, a single voice with no particular qualities. Sometimes it's muffled, like the voice of a tiny insect crying for help from inside a sealed coffin; and other times the coffin shatters, like a brittle exoskeleton, and from within rises a piercing, crystal shriek that lacerates the midnight blackness. These are approximations, of course, but highly useful in pinning down the sound of the voice of horror, if one still wants to.

In other words, the proper style of horror is really that of the *personal confession*, and nothing but: manuscripts found in lonely places. While some may consider this the height of cornball melodrama, and I grant that it is, it is also the rawhead and bloody bones of true blue grue. It's especially true when the confessing narrator has something he must urgently get off his chest and labors beneath its nightmarish weight all the while he is telling the tale. Nothing could be more obvious, except perhaps that the tale teller, ideally,

should himself be a writer of horror fiction by trade. That really is more obvious. Better. But how can the *confessional* technique be applied to the story we've been working with? Its hero isn't a horror writer, at least not that I can see. Clearly some adjustments have to be made.

As the reader may have noticed, Nathan's character can be altered to suit a variety of literary styles. He can lean toward the normal in one and the abnormal in another. He can be transformed from fully fleshed person to disembodied fictional abstraction. He can play any number of basic human and nonhuman roles, representing just about anything a writer could want. Mostly, though, I wanted Nathan, when I first conceived him and his ordeal, to represent none other than my real life self. For behind my pseudonymic mask of Gerald Karloff Riggers, I am no one if not Nathan Jeremy Stein.

So it's not too far-fetched that in his story Nathan should be a horror writer, at least an aspiring one. Perhaps he dreams of achieving Gothic glory by writing tales that are nothing less than magic, timeless, and you know what. Perhaps he would sell his soul in order to accomplish this fear, I mean *feat*. But Nathan was not born to be a seller of his soul or anything else, that's why he became a horror writer rather than going into Dad's (and Granddad's) business. Nathan is, however, a buyer: a haunter of spectral marketplaces, a visitant of discount houses of unreality, a bargain hunter in the deepest basement of the unknown. And in some mysterious way, he comes to procure his dream of horror without even realizing what it is he's bought or with what he has bought it. Like the other Nathan, *this* Nathan eventually finds that what he's bought is not quite what he

bargained for—a pig in a poke rather that a nice pair of pants. What? I'll explain.

In the confessional version of Nathan's horror story, the main character must be provided with something horrible to confess, something fitting to his persona as a die-hard horrorist. The solution is quite obvious, which doesn't prevent its also being freakish to the core. Nathan will confess that he's gone too far into FEAR. He's always had a predilection for this particular discipline, but now it's gotten out of hand, out of control, and out of this world.

The turning point in Nathan's biography of horror-seeking is, as in previous accounts, an aborted fling with Lorna McFickel. In the other versions of the story, the character known by this name is a personage of shifting significance, representing at turns the ultra-real or the super-ideal to her would-be romancer. The confessional version of "Romance of a Dead Man," however, gives her a new identity, namely that of Lorna McFickel herself, who lives across the hall from me in a Gothic castle of high-rise apartments, twin-towered and honeycombed with newly carpeted passageways. But otherwise there's not much difference between the female lead in the fictional story and her counterpart in the factual one. While the storybook Lorna will remember Nathan as the creep who spoiled her evening, who disappointed her—Real Lorna, Normal Lorna feels exactly the same way, or rather felt, since I doubt she even thinks about the one she called, and not without good reason, *the most disgusting creature on the face of the earth*. And although this patent exaggeration was spoken in the heat of a very hot moment, I believe her attitude was basically sincere. Even so, I will never reveal the motivation for this outburst of hers,

not even under the throbbing treat of torture. (I meant, of course, to write *threat*. Only a tricky trickle of the pen's ink, nothing more.) Such things as motivation are not important to this horror story anyway, not nearly as important as what happens to Nathan following Lorna's revelatory rejection.

For he now knows, as he never knew before, how weird he really is, how unlike everyone else, how abnormal and unreal fate has made him. He knows that supernatural influences have been governing his life all along, that he is subject only to the rule of demonic forces, which now want this expatriate from the red void back in their bony arms. In brief, Nathan should never have been born a human being, a truth he must accept. Hard. (The most painful words are "never again," or just plain "never!") And he knows that someday the demons will come for him.

The height of the crisis comes one evening when the horror writer's ego is at low ebb, possibly to ebb all the way back to the abyss. He has attempted to express his supernatural tragedy in a short horror story, his last, but he just can't reach a climax of suitable intensity and imagination, one that would do justice to the cosmic scale of his pain. He has failed to embody in words his semi-autobiographical sorrow, and all these games with protective names have only made it more painful. It hurts to hide his heart within pseudonyms of pseudonyms. Finally, the horror writer sits down at his desk and begins whining like a brat all over the manuscript of his unfinished story. This goes on for quite some time, until Nathan's sole desire is to seek a human oblivion in a human bed. Whatever its drawbacks, grief is a great sleeping draught to drug oneself into a noiseless, lightless paradise far from an agonizing universe. This is so.

Later on there comes a knocking at the door, an impatient rapping, really. Who is it? One must open it to find out.

“Here, you forgot these,” a pretty girl said to me, flinging a woolly bundle into my arms. Just as she was about to walk away, she turned and scanned the features of my face a little more scrupulously. I have sometimes pretended to be other people, the odd Norman and even a Nathan or two, but I knew I couldn't get away with it anymore. Never again! “I'm sorry,” she said. “I thought you were Norman. This is his apartment, right across and one down the hall from mine.” She pointed to show me. “Who're you?”

“I'm a friend of Norman's,” I answered.

“Oh, I guess I'm sorry then. Well, those're his pants I threw at you.”

“Were you mending them or something?” I asked innocently, checking them as if looking for the scars of repair.

“No, he just didn't have time to put them back on the other night when I threw him out, you know what I mean? I'm moving out of this creepy dump just to get away from him, and you can tell him those words.”

“Please come in from that drafty hallway and you can tell him yourself.”

I smiled my smile and she, not unresponsively, smiled hers. I closed the door behind her.

“So, do you have a name?” she asked.

“Penzance,” I replied. “Call me Pete.”

“Well, at least you're not Harold Wackers, or whatever the name is on those lousy books of Norman's.”

“I believe it's *Wickers*, H. J. Wickers.”

“Anyway, you don't seem at all like Norman, or even someone who'd be a friend of his.”

“I'm sure that was intended as a compliment, from what I've gathered about you and Norm. Actually, though, I too write books not unlike those of H. J. Wickers. My apartment across town is being painted, and Norman was kind enough to take me in, even loan me his desk for a while.” I manually indicated the cluttered, weeped-upon object of my last remark. “In fact, Norman and I sometimes collaborate under a common pen-name, and right now we're working together on a manuscript.” That was an eternity ago, but somehow it seems like the seconds and minutes of those days are still nipping at our heels. What tricks human clocks can play, even on us who are no longer subject to them! But it's a sort of reverse magic, I suppose, to enshackle the timeless with Granddaddy's wrist-grips of time, just as it is the most negative of miracles to smother unburdened spirits with the burdensome overcoat of matter.

“That's nice, I'm sure,” she replied to what I said a few statements back. “By the way. I'm Laura—”

“O'finney,” I finished. “Norman's spoken quite highly of you.” I didn't mention that he had also spoken quite lowly of her too.

“Where is the creep, anyway?” she inquired.

“He's sleeping,” I answered, lifting a vague finger toward the rear section of the apartment, where a shadowy indention led to bathrooms and bedrooms. “He's had a hard night of writing.”

The girl's face assumed a disgusted expression.

“Forget it,” she said, heading for the door. Then she turned and very slowly walked a little ways back toward me. “Maybe we'll see each other again.”

“Anything is possible,” I assured her.

“Just do me a favor and keep Norman away from me, if you don't mind.”

“I think I can do that very easily. But you have to do something for me.”

“What?”

I leaned toward her very confidentially.

“Please die, Desiderata,” I whispered in her ear, while gripping her neck with both hands, cutting short a scream along with her life. Then I really went to work.

“Wake up, Norman,” I shouted a little later. I was standing at the foot of his bed, my hands positioned behind my back. “You were really dead to the world, you know that?”

A little drama took place on Norman's face in which surprise overcame sleepiness and both were vanquished by anxiety. He had been through a lot the past couple nights, struggling with our “Notes” and other things, and really needed his sleep. I hated to wake him up.

“Who? What do you want?” he said, quickly sitting up in bed.

“Never mind what I want. Right now we are concerned with what *you* want, you know what I mean? Remember what you told that girl the other night, remember what you wanted her to do that got her so upset?”

“If you don't get the hell out of here—”

“That's what *she* said too, remember? And then she said she wished she had *never met you*. And that was the line, wasn't it, that gave you the inspiration for our fictionalized adventure. Poor Nathan never had the chance you had. Oh yes, very fancy rigmarole with the enchanted trousers. Blame it all on some old bitch and her dead husband. Very realistic, I'm sure. When the real reason—”

“Get out of here!” he yelled. But he calmed down somewhat when he saw that ferocity in itself had no effect on me.

“What did you expect from that girl. You did tell her that you wanted to embrace, what was it? Oh yes, a headless woman. A headless woman, for heaven's sake, that's asking a lot. And you did want her to make herself look like one, at least for a little while. Well, I've got the answer to your prayers. How's this for headless?” I said, holding up the head from behind my back.

He didn't make a sound, though his two eyes screamed a thousand times louder than any single mouth. I tossed the long-haired and bloody noggin in his lap, but he threw the bedcovers over it and frantically pushed the whole business onto the floor with his feet.

“The rest of her is in the bathtub. Go see, if you want. I'll wait.”

He didn't make a move or say a word for quite a few moments. But when he finally did speak, each syllable came out so calm and smooth, so free of the vibrations of fear, that I have to say it shook me up a bit.

“Whooo are you?” he asked as if he already knew.

“Do you really need to have a name, and would it even do any good? Should we call that disengaged head down there Laura or Lorna, or just plain Desiderata? And what, in heaven's name, should I call you—Norman or Nathan, Harold or Gerald?”

“I thought so,” he said disgustedly. Then he began to speak in an eerily rational voice, but very rapidly. He did not even seem to be talking to anyone in particular. “Since the thing to which I am speaking,” he said, “since this thing knows what only I could know, and since it tells me what

only I could tell myself, I must therefore be completely alone in this room, or perhaps even dreaming. Yes, dreaming. Otherwise the diagnosis is insanity. Very true. Profoundly certain. Go away now, Mr. Madness. Go away, Dr. Dream. You made your point, now let me sleep. I'm through with you." Then he lay his head down on the pillow and closed his eyes.

"Norman," I said. "Do you always go to bed with your trousers on?"

He opened his eyes and now noticed what he had been too deranged to notice before. He sat up again.

"Very good, Mr. Madness. These look like the real thing. But that's not possible since Laura still has them, sorry about that. Funny, they won't come off. The imaginary zipper must be stuck. Gee, I guess I'm in trouble now. I'm a dead man if there ever was one, hoo. Always make sure you know what you're buying, that's what I say. Heaven help me, please. You never know what you might be getting into. Come off, damn you! Oh, what grief. Well, so when do I start to rot, Mr. Madness? Are you still there? What happened to the lights?"

The lights had gone out in the room and everything glowed with a bluish luminescence. Lightning began flashing outside the bedroom window, and thunder resounded through a rainless night. The moon shone through an opening in the clouds, a blood-red moon only the damned and the dead can see.

"Rot your way back to us, you freak of creation. Rot your way out of this world. Come home to a pain so great that it is bliss itself. You were born to be bones not flesh. Rot your way free of that skin of mere skin."

“Is this really happening to me? I mean, I'm doing my best, sir. It isn't easy, not at all. Horrible electricity down there. Horrible. Am I bathed in magic acid or something? Oh, it hurts, my love. Ah, ah, ah. It hurts so much. Never let it end. If I have to be like this, then never let me wake up, Dr. Dream. Can you do that, at least?”

I could feel my bony wings rising out of my back and saw them spread gloriously in the blue mirror before me. My eyes were now jewels, hard and radiant. My jaws were a cavern of dripping silver and through my veins ran rivers of putrescent gold. He was writhing on the bed like a wounded insect, making sounds like nothing in human memory. I swept him up and wrapped my sticky arms again and again around his trembling body. He was laughing like a child, the child of another world. And a great wrong was about to be rectified.

I signaled the windows to open onto the night, and, very slowly, they did. His infant's laughter had now turned to tears, but they would soon run dry, I knew this. At last we would be free of the earth. The windows opened wide over the city below and the profound blackness above welcomed us.

I had never tried this before. But when the time came, I found it all so easy.

Professor Nobody's Little Lectures On Supernatural Horror (2010 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

First published in *Songs Of A Dead Dreamer*, 1985

The Eyes That Never Blink

Mist on a lake, fog in thick woods, a golden light shining on wet stones—such sights make it all very easy. Something lives in the lake, rustles through the woods, inhabits the stones or the earth beneath them. Whatever it may be, this *something* lies just out of sight, but not out of vision for the eyes that never blink. In the right surroundings our entire being is made of eyes that dilate to witness the haunting of the universe. But really, do the right surroundings have to be so obvious in their spectral atmosphere?

Take a cramped waiting room, for instance. Everything there seems so well-anchored in normalcy. Others around you talk ever so quietly; the old clock on the wall is sweeping aside the seconds with its thin red finger; the window blinds deliver slices of light from the outside world and shuffle them with shadows. Yet at any time and in any place, our bunkers of banality may begin to rumble. You see, even in a stronghold of our fellow beings we may be subject to abnor-

mal fears that would land us in an asylum if we voiced them to another. Did we just feel some presence that does not belong among us? Do our eyes see something in a corner of that room in which we wait for we know not what?

Just a little doubt slipped into the mind, a little trickle of suspicion in the bloodstream, and all those eyes of ours, one by one, open up to the world and see its horror. Then: no belief or body of laws will guard you; no friend, no counselor, no appointed personage will save you; no locked door will protect you; no private office will hide you. Not even the solar brilliance of a summer day will harbor you from horror. For horror eats the light and digests it into darkness.

On Morbidity

Isolation, mental strain, emotional exertions, visionary infatuations, well-executed fevers, repudiations of well-being: only a few of the many exercises practiced by that specimen we shall call the "morbid man." And our subject of supernatural horror is a vital part of his program. Retreating from a world of health and sanity, or at least one that daily invests in such commodities, the morbid man seeks the shadows behind the scenes of life. He backs himself into a corner alive with cool drafts and fragrant with centuries of must. It is in that corner that he builds a world of ruins out of the battered stones of his imagination, a rancid world rife with things smelling of the crypt.

But this world is not all a romantic sanctum for the dark in spirit. So let us condemn it for a moment, this deep-end of dejection. Though there is no name for what might be called the morbid man's "sin," it still seems in violation of some deeply ingrained morality. The morbid man does not appear

to be doing himself or others any good. And while we all know that melancholic moping and lugubrious ruminating are quite palatable as side-dishes of existence, he has turned them into a house specialty! Ultimately, however, he may meet this charge of wrongdoing with a simple "What of it?"

Now, such a response assumes morbidity to be a certain class of vice, one to be pursued without apology, and one whose advantages and disadvantages must be enjoyed or endured *outside the law.* But as a sower of vice, if only in his own soul, the morbid man incurs the following censure: that he is a symptom or a cause of decay within both individual and collective spheres of being. And decay, like every other process of becoming, hurts everybody. "Good!" shouts the morbid man. "No good!" counters the crowd. Both positions betray dubious origins: one in resentment, the other in fear. And when the moral debate on this issue eventually reaches an impasse or becomes too tangled for truth, then psychological polemics can begin. Later on we will find other angles from which this problem may be attacked, enough to keep us occupied for the rest of our lives.

Meanwhile, the morbid man keeps putting his *time on earth* to no good use, until in the end—amidst mad winds, wan moonlight, and pasty specters—he uses his exactly like everyone else uses theirs: all up.

Pessimism and Supernatural Horror—

Lecture One

Madness, chaos, bone-deep mayhem, devastation of innumerable souls—while we scream and perish, History licks a finger and turns the page. Fiction, unable to compete with

the world for vividness of pain and lasting effects of fear, compensates in its own way. How? By inventing more bizarre means to outrageous ends. Among these means, of course, is the supernatural. In transforming natural ordeals into supernatural ones, we find the strength to affirm and deny their horror simultaneously, to savor and suffer them at the same time.

So it is that supernatural horror is the product of a profoundly divided species of being. It is not the pastime of even our closest relations in the wholly natural world: we gained it, as part of our gloomy inheritance, when we became what we are. Once awareness of the human predicament was achieved, we immediately took off in two directions, splitting ourselves down the middle. One half became dedicated to apologetics, even celebration, of our new toy of consciousness. The other half condemned and occasionally launched direct assaults on this "gift."

Supernatural horror was one of the ways we found that would allow us to live with our double selves. By its employ, we discovered how to take all the things that victimize us in our natural lives and turn them into the very stuff of demonic delight in our fantasy lives. In story and song, we could entertain ourselves with the worst we could think of, overwriting real pains with ones that were unreal and harmless to our species. We can also do this trick without trespassing onto the property of supernatural horror, but then we risk running into miseries that are too close to home. While horror may make us squirm or quake, it will not make us cry at the pity of things. The vampire may symbolize our horror of both life and death, but none of us has ever been uprooted by a symbol. The zombie may conceptualize our

sickness of the flesh and its appetites, but no one has ever been sickened to death by a concept. By means of supernatural horror we may pull our own strings of fate without collapsing—natural-born puppets whose lips are painted with our own blood.

Pessimism and Supernatural Horror—

Lecture Two

Dead bodies that walk in the night, living bodies suddenly possessed by new owners and deadly aspirations, bodies without sensible form, and a body of unnatural laws in accordance with which tortures and executions are meted out—some examples of the logic of supernatural horror. It is a logic founded on fear, a logic whose sole principle states: "Existence equals nightmare." Unless life is a dream, nothing makes sense. For as a reality, it is a rank failure. A few more examples: a trusting soul catches the night in a bad mood and must pay a dreadful price; another opens the wrong door, sees something he should not have, and suffers the consequences; still another walks down an unfamiliar street… and is *lost* forever.

That we all deserve punishment by horror is as mystifying as it is undeniable. To be an accomplice, however involuntarily, in a reasonless non-reality is cause enough for the harshest sentencing. But we have been trained so well to accept the "order" of an unreal world that we do not rebel against it. How could we? Where pain and pleasure form a corrupt alliance against us, paradise and hell are merely different divisions in the same monstrous bureaucracy. And between these two poles exists everything we know or can

ever know. It is not even possible to imagine a utopia, earthly or otherwise, that can stand up under the mildest criticism. But one must take into account the shocking fact that we live on a world that *spins*. After considering this truth, nothing should come as a surprise.

Still, on rare occasions we do overcome hopelessness or velleity and make mutinous demands to live in a real world, one that is at least episodically ordered to our advantage. But perhaps it is only a demon of some kind that moves us to such idle insubordination, the more so to aggravate our condition in the unreal. After all, is it not wondrous that we are allowed to be both witnesses and victims of the sepulchral pomp of wasting tissue? And one thing we know is real: horror. It is so real, in fact, that we cannot be sure it could not exist without us. Yes, it needs our imaginations and our consciousness, but it does not ask or require our consent to use them. Indeed, horror operates with complete autonomy. Generating ontological havoc, it is mephitic foam upon which our lives merely float. And, all said, we must face up to it: horror is more real than we are.

Sardonic Harmony

Compassion for human hurt, a humble sense of our impermanence, an absolute valuation of justice—all of our so-called virtues only trouble us and serve to bolster, not assuage, horror. In addition, these qualities are our least vital, the least in line with life. More often than not, they stand in the way of one's rise in the welter of this world, which found its pace long ago and has not deviated from it since. The putative affirmations of life—each of them based on the propaganda of Tomorrow: reproduction, revolution in its widest

sense, piety in any form you can name—are only affirmations of our desires. And, in fact, these affirmations affirm nothing but our penchant for self-torment, our mania to preserve a demented innocence in the face of gruesome facts.

By means of supernatural horror we may evade, if momentarily, the horrific reprisals of affirmation. Every one of us, having been stolen from nonexistence, opens his eyes on the world and looks down the road at a few convulsions and a final obliteration. What a weird scenario. So why affirm anything, why make a pathetic virtue of a terrible necessity? We are destined to a fool's fate that deserves to be mocked. And since there is no one else around to do the mocking, we will take on the job. So let us indulge in cruel pleasures against ourselves and our pretensions, let us delight in the Cosmic Macabre. At least we may send up a few bitter laughs into the cobwebbed corners of this crusty old universe.

Supernatural horror, in all its eerie constructions, enables a reader to taste treats inconsistent with his personal welfare. Admittedly, this is not a practice likely to find universal favor. True macabrists are as rare as poets and form a secret society by the bad-standing of their memberships elsewhere, some of their outside affiliations having been cancelled as early as birth. But those who have gotten a good whiff of other worlds and sampled a cuisine marginal to stable existence will not be able to stay themselves from the uncanny feast of horrors that has been laid out for them. They will loiter in moonlight, eyeing the entranceways to cemeteries, waiting for some propitious moment to crash the gates and see what is inside.

Once and for all, let us speak the paradox aloud: “We have been force-fed for so long the shudders of a thousand graveyards that at last, seeking a macabre redemption, a salvation by horror, we willingly consume the terrors of the tomb… and find them to our liking.”

Professor Nobody's Little Lectures On Supernatural Horror (1989 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

First published in *Songs Of A Dead Dreamer*, 1985

One Whole Night in a Haunted World

Mist on a lake, fog in a wood, streetlights shining on wet pavement—such sights make it all very easy. Something lives in the lake and hides in the woods, stalks upon the pavement or dwells under it. Whatever it may be, this *something* lies just out of sight... but not out of vision. In certain surroundings our entire being is made of eyes, every atom dilates to witness the haunting of the universe. Even the dullest find this easily done...

Now take a crowded room, such as this one: the door is shut; the clock on the wall is sweeping aside the seconds with its thin red finger; the window blinds deliver slices of light from the outside world and shuffle them with shadows; someone coughs, there, like that. And suddenly the hollows of routine begin to buzz a bit. Did someone leave a friend out in the hallway? I see a pair of squinting eyes looking in... but never mind, they went away. You see, even here it's not so very hard.

And if here, then everywhere and at every time. Just a little doubt slipped into the mind, a trickle of suspicion in the bloodstream, and all those eyes, one by one, will open to the world, will see its horror as it has never been seen before. Then: no belief or body of laws will guard you; no friend, no counselor, no appointed personage will save you; no crowded schoolroom, no locked bedroom, no private office will hide you. Not even the solar brilliance of spring is protection against the horror. For the horror eats light and digests it into darkness.

And in darkness we open our eyes, briefly, and in darkness we close them.

Thank you, that will be all for today.

On Morbidity

Isolation, mental derangement, strange emotional states, visions, well-tended fevers, neglected well-being: only a few of the many techniques cultivated by the virtuoso of morbidity. Just as vital to his development is a real feeling for supernatural horror. Retreating from a world of "health" and "sanity," or at least one that daily invests in such commodities, the morbid man seeks the shadows behind the scenes of life. He backs himself into a corner alive with cool drafts and fragrant with centuries of must. The flowers he finds on the wallpaper seem half-real and cause him to dream of vampire gardens and dwarfish creatures with flesh of thorns. There, in that corner, he builds a world of ruins out of the battered stones of his imagination.

But this world is not one of pure romance, not all a dazzling music hall of lyrical mania. So let us condemn it for a moment, this deep end of dreams. Though there is no

name for the morbid man's sin, it still seems in violation of some law or other, perhaps many laws, probably all of them. He does not appear to be doing any good, either for himself or others. And while we all know that the macabre and uncanny are quite palatable as side-dishes of existence, he has turned them into a hideous specialty of the house! Ultimately, however, he may meet these charges of wrongdoing with a simple "What of it?"

Now, such a response assumes morbidity to be a certain class of vice, one to be pursued without apology, and one whose advantages and disadvantages must be enjoyed or endured *outside the law*. But as a sower of vice, if only in his own soul, the morbid man incurs this criticism: that he is a symptom or a cause of decay within various individual and social spheres of being. And decay, like every other process of becoming, hurts everybody. "Good!" shouts the morbid man. "Not good!" counters the crowd. Born of extremely narrow and personal feelings, both positions betray inadmirable origins: the one in resentment, the other in fear. And when the ethical debate on this issue eventually reaches an impasse or becomes too tangled for truth, then the psychiatric one can begin. Later on we will find other angles from which this problem may be attacked, enough to keep us occupied for the rest of our lives.

Meanwhile, the morbid man keeps putting his time to no good use, until in the end—amidst mad winds, moonlight, and craving specters—he uses his exactly like everyone else uses theirs: all up.

Thank you, don't forget to read the assignment.

Pessimism and Supernatural Horror—*Lecture One*

Madness, mayhem, erotic vandalism, devastation of innumerable souls—while we scream and perish, History licks a finger and turns the page. Fiction, unable to compete with the world for vividness of pain and lasting effects of fear, compensates in its own way. How? By inventing more tortuous and excruciatingly bizarre means to surprising ends. Among these means, of course, is the supernatural. In transforming natural ordeals into supernatural ones, we find the strength to affirm and deny their horror simultaneously, to savor and suffer them at the same time. Nevertheless, the most endearing thing about the supernatural is not that its horrors are real or unreal, but that, in some paradoxical way, they are both. Indeed, the imagination makes no such distinctions, for it is the dreaming star around which the poor pictures of "reality" pallidly circle.

A case in point is the vampire. Is he merely a human aspiration extended beyond natural logic by the logic of hope and desire? Or is he... a vampire? Changing shape at will, sinking teeth into flesh, gorging himself on that warm and lovely blood, and—unless someone is decent enough to stop him— anticipating this nightly regimen far into eternity: such activities, in their proper realm of dreams, are living truths and a legitimate source of terror. Only when we awake, from stories or from sleep, does the vampire die, and, as a "concept," become a parasite of our flesh. But both of these worlds, real and unreal, are contained within us—and between them our souls are doomed to wander.

So supernatural horror is the product of a profoundly divided species of being. It is not the pastime of even our closest relations in the wholly natural world; we gained it, as part of our gloomy inheritance, when we became what we

are. Once awareness of the human predicament was achieved, our consciousness immediately had to split: one half went the way of apologetics, even celebration, of this new toy of conscious existence; the other half took to condemning and occasionally launching direct assaults on this "gift". The first merely provides justification for the unavoidable facts of life, which need to be justified if they are to be tolerated at all. The second, a perverse and gratuitous twin, keeps us from being absolute victims, allows us to struggle against our doom while all the time cheering on its despicable agents and their sleazy ways. All the things that victimize us in natural life can become the very stuff of demonic delight in the make-believe world of supernatural horror.

In the end, of course, we remain puppets and our smiles are still painted ones. But now at least we have moistened them with our own blood.

Thank you, we'll pick this up at our next meeting.

Pessimism and Supernatural Horror—*Lecture Two*

Dead bodies that walk in the night, living bodies suddenly possessed by new owners and deadly aspirations, a community ravaged by beings that obey alien laws, and a whole world at the mercy of unknown laws which authorize chaotic upheavals of the natural order—some examples of the logic of supernatural horror. It is a logic that is founded on fear; it is a logic whose sole principle states: "Existence equals Nightmare." Unless life is a dream, nothing makes sense. For as a reality, it is a rank failure. A few more examples: someone catches the night in a bad mood and must pay a dreadful price; someone opens the wrong door, sees

something he should not have, and suffers the consequences; someone walks down an unfamiliar street... and is lost forever.

That these unfortunates deserve their fate is obvious. To be an accomplice, however involuntarily, in a reasonless non-reality is grounds for the harshest sentencing. And, come to think of it, none of this could happen in a real world; that is, one of reasonable order and proportion. But could there ever be such a world, and could we abide it? The evidence is not encouraging. Where pain and pleasure form a corrupt alliance against us, paradise and hell are merely different departments in the same monstrous bureaucracy. And between these two poles exists everything we now know or can ever know. No one has yet succeeded in even imagining a utopia, earthly or otherwise, that can stand up under the mildest criticism. But one must take into account the shocking fact that we live on a world that *spins*. Afterward, nothing comes as a surprise.

Then again, perhaps we ourselves are being unreasonable in asking that the world be real; perhaps it is only a demon of some kind who put this thought in our heads, this wish in our hearts. Why not be content that we are allowed to perform in this gruesome circus of shadows? And one thing we know is real: horror. It is so real, in fact, that we cannot quite be sure that it couldn't exist without us. Yes, it needs our imaginations and our awareness, but it does not ask or require our consent to use them. Indeed, both at the individual and the collective levels, horror operates with an eerie autonomy. Generating specters, ghouls, and grisly dooms, it is a loathsome foam upon which our lives merely float.

And, ultimately, we must admit it: horror is more real than we are.

Thank you, no class tomorrow due to the holiday.

Sardonic Harmony

A sense of beauty and order, compassion for human hurt, offering others the benefit rather than the disadvantages of our doubts, nurturing a rich respect for gestures of decency and nobility—all our best attributes are also our most troublesome, serving to bolster, not assuage, horror. In addition, these qualities are our least vital, the least in line with life. More often than not, they stand in the way of one's rise in the welter of this world, which found its pace long ago and has not deviated from it since. The so-called affirmations of life—all based on the propaganda of Tomorrow: reproduction, revolution in its widest sense, religion in any form you can name—are only affirmations of our desires. And, in fact, these affirmations affirm nothing but our penchant for self-torment, our mania to preserve a demented innocence in the face of gruesome facts.

By means of supernatural horror we may evade, momentarily, the horrific reprisals of affirmation. Each one of us, out of the blackness of nonexistence, opens his eyes on the world. Well, here we are... looking down the road at a few convulsions and a final obliteration. What a weirdly fantastic scenario! So why affirm anything, why make a pathetic virtue of a terrible necessity? We are destined to a fool's fate which deserves to be mocked. And since there is no one else around to do the mocking, we will take on the job. So let us indulge in cruel pleasures against ourselves and our pretensions, let us delight in the Cosmic Macabre. At least we may

send up a few bitter laughs into the cobwebbed corners of this crusty old universe.

Supernatural horror, in all its bizarre constructions, enables a reader to taste a selection of treats at odds with his well-being. Admittedly, this is not an indulgence likely to find universal favor. True macabrists are as rare as poets and form a secret society unto themselves, if only because their memberships elsewhere were cancelled, some of them from the moment of birth. But those who have sampled these joys marginal to stable existence, once they have gotten a good whiff of other worlds, will not be able to stay away for long. They will loiter in moonlight, eyeing the entranceways to cemeteries, waiting for some terribly propitious moment to crash the gates.

Once and for all, let us speak the paradox aloud: “We have been force-fed for so long the shudders of a thousand graveyards that at last, seeking a macabre redemption, a salvation by horror, we willingly consume the terrors of the tomb… and find them to our liking.”

Thank you, you've been an attentive class. Good luck on the final.

The Troubles Of Dr. Thoss (2010 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

First published in *Songs Of A Dead Dreamer*, 1985

When Alb Indys first heard the name of Dr. Thoss, he was flustered by his inability to locate the source from which it emanated. Right from the start, though, there seemed to be at least two voices chattering this name just within earshot, saying it over and over as if it were the central topic of some rambling discourse. Initially their words sounded as if they were being emitted by an old radio in another apartment, for Alb Indys had no such device of his own. But he finally realized that the name was being uttered, in rather hoarse tones, in the street below his window, which was set in the wall not far from the foot of his bed. After spending the night, not unusually, walking the floor or slumping wide-eyed in a stuffed chair beside the aforementioned window, he was now, at mid-afternoon, still attired in pale gray pajamas. Since morning he had kept to his bed, propped up against its tall headboard by huge pillows. Upon his lap rested a drawing book filled with thick sheets of paper, very white. A bottle of black ink was in reach on the bedside table, and a shapely black pen with a silvery nib was held tightly in his right hand. Presently Alb Indys was busily at work on a pen-and-ink rendering of the window and stuffed chair he had begun during his wakefulness the night before.

That was when he overheard, however indistinctly, the voices down in the street.

Alb Indys tossed the drawing book farther down the bed, where it fell against a lump swelling in the blankets: more than likely the creation of a wadded pair of trousers or an old shirt, possibly both, given the artist's personal habits. The window of his room was partly open and, walking over to it, he discreetly pushed it out a little more. They should have been close by, those speakers whom Alb Indys wished would go on speaking. He remembered hearing one voice say, “It's going to be the end of someone's troubles,” or words to that effect, with the name of Dr. Thoss figuring in the discussion. The appellation was unfamiliar to him and gave rise to feelings that had much less to do with hope, which Alb Indys tried to keep at a minimum, than it did with nervous expectancy, as of some fore-vision of the unknown. But the talking had stopped, and just as he was becoming interested in this doctor. Where were they, those interlocutors? How could they have simply vanished?

When he fully extended the bedroom window, Alb Indys saw no one on the street. He stretched forward for a better look. Strands of blond hair, almost white, fell across his face, and then by a sudden salty breeze were blown back, thin and loose. It was not a very brilliant day, not one of excess activity. A few silhouettes and shadows maneuvered in the dimness on the other side of unreflecting windows. The stones of the street, so sparkling and picturesque for those enjoying a holiday here, succumbed to dullness out of season. Alb Indys fixed on one of them which looked dislodged in the pavement, imagining he heard it working itself free, creaking around in its stony cradle. But the noise was that of metal

hinges squeaking somewhere in the wind. He quickly found them, his hearing made keen by insomnia. They were attached to a wooden sign hung outside the uppermost window of an old building. The structure ascended in peaks and slants and ledges into the gray sky, until at its highest, turreted point swung the sign. Alb Indys could never clearly make out its four capital letters so far above, though he had gazed up at them a thousand times. (And how often it seemed that something gazed back at him from that high window.) But a radio station need not be a visual presence in an old resort town, only an aural landmark, a voice for vacationers signaling the “sound beside the sea.”

Alb Indys closed the window and returned to his thin-lined representation of it. Though he began the picture in the middle of a sleepless night, he did not copy the constellations beyond the windowpanes, keeping the drawing unmarred by any artistic suggestion of those star-filled hours. Nothing was in the window but the pure whiteness of the page, the pale abyss of unshut eyes. After making a few more marks on the picture, completing it, he signed his work very neatly in the lower right-hand corner. This page would later be put in one of the large portfolios stacked upon a desk across the room.

What else was contained in these portfolios? Two sorts of things, two types of artwork which between them told of the nature and limits of Alb Indys's pictorial talents. The first type included such scenes as the artist had recently executed: images of his immediate surroundings, sights observable within his room. This was not his first study of the window, the subject he most often returned to and always in the same plain style. Sometimes he sat in the chair beside

the window and portrayed his bed, lumpy and unmade, with occasional attention to the side table (noting each nick that blemished its original off-white surface) and the undecorated lamp which stood upon it (recording each chip that pocked its glassy smoothness). The desk-side of the room also received its fair share of treatments. The wall at that end of the room was the most tempting of the four, in itself a subtle canvas that had been painted and pitted and painted again, coated and repeatedly scraped of infinitesimal, sea-town organisms, leaving it shriveled and pasty and incurably damp. No pictures were hung to patch either this or any other wall of the room, though a tall bookcase obscured who knows what unseen worlds behind it. Transitory compositions—a flung shoe leaning toe-up against a bedpost, a dropped glove which hazard endowed with a pointing index finger—formed the remaining examples of this first type of drawing in which the artist indulged.

And the second type? Was it more interesting than the first? Perhaps, though not as far as imagination was concerned, for Alb Indys had none whatever, or at least none that he employed in a customary sense—that of evoking from within himself something that did not already exist outside him. Whenever he tried to form a picture of something, anything, in his mind, all he saw was a blank: a new page that retained the purity of its original mintage, nothingness unstained by inner conception. Once he nearly had a vision of something, a few specks flying across a fuzzy background of white snow in a white sky—and there was a garbled voice which he had not intentionally conjured. But it all fizzled out after a few seconds into a silent stretch of emptiness. This artistic handicap, however, was anything

but a frustration or a disappointment to Alb Indys. He did not often test the powers of his imagination, for he somehow knew that there was as much to be lost as gained in doing so. In any case, there were many ways to make a picture, and Alb Indys had a second method, as mentioned, by which he created his artworks, one that differed markedly from his first, more conventional, idiom.

The second technique that Alb Indys put to use could be styled as a kind of artistic forgery, though it might just as well be described by the term which he himself preferred—collaboration. And who were his collaborators? In many instances, there was no way of knowing: anonymous penmen, mostly, of illustrations in very old books and periodicals. His shelves were full of them, dark and massive, their worn covers incredibly tender to the touch. French, Flemish, German, Swedish, Russian, Polish, any cultural source of published material would do as long as its pictures spoke the language of dark lines and vacant spaces. In fact, the more disparate the origins of these images, the better they served his purpose: because Alb Indys liked to take a century-old engraving of a sub-arctic landscape, studiously plagiarize its manner of depicting vast expanses of frozen whiteness, then select an equally old depiction of a church in a foreign town he had never heard of, painstakingly transport it stone by stone deep into the glacial desert, and finally, from still older pages, transcribe with all possible fidelity an unknown artist's conception of assorted devils and demons, making them dance down from the ice-mad mountains and invade the house of worship. This was the typical process and product of his work with collaborators, whose art Alb Indys plainly exploited in ways their fabricators never intended.

Confiscating their images, he was moved to patch them to one another in a spirit of malicious abandon, as though to express the deranging effects worked upon him by the cruel vigilance he suffered night after night. Under his careful eye and steady hand there took place a mingling of artistic forms that together were monstrously chimerical, their disparate components tumbling out of the years to create nightmarish anatomies. For it seemed perfectly natural to Alb Indys that, like everything else, the most innocuous phenomena should eventually find their way from good dreams into bad, or from bad dreams into those that were wholly abysmal.

At the moment he was working on a new collaboration, but all he had as yet was its barest beginnings: a sickle-shaped scar of moon, a common enough image which Alb Indys wanted to remove from one black sky and fix in another where it would take on a more ominous significance. Its relocation could have provided him with a way to waste the rest of the afternoon. However, the commotion outside the window earlier had upset the pace of his day and given it a new rhythm. Almost any event could do this to an insomniac's fragile routine, so as yet there was no reason to contemplate the phenomenal. An appearance by his landlord, whether rent-hungry or merely casual, sometimes altered his course for weeks after. Before, his thoughts were of nothing, genuinely. But now old preoccupations had become stirred up and took on an edge. Was there anything special about this doctor, this Thoss? Alb Indys could not help wondering. Was he like the others, or was he a doctor who would hear, really *hear* you? Not one had yet heard him, not one had offered him a remedy worth the name.

If there was indeed a new doctor who had set up practice in the seaside town, Alb Indys could encounter none of this individual's cures, either real or pretended, by staying at home. He needed to find out some things for himself, make inquiries, get out into the world. When was the last time he had had a good meal? Perhaps that would be a way to begin, and afterward he could take it from there. One could always get acceptable food at the place right around the corner, with no reason to fear they were poisoning their patrons. Good, he thought. And once he had eaten he might have a nice walk for himself, gain some advantage from the fresh air and scenery of the town. After all, many people came here for vaguely therapeutic reasons, believing there were medicines dispensed by the very mood of the town's quaint streets and its sea-licked shores. It might even happen that his maladies would disappear of their own accord, leaving him with no need for this doctor, this Thoss.

He dressed himself in dark, heavy clothes and made sure to lock the door behind him. But he had forgotten to shut the window properly and a breeze edged in, disturbing the pages of the drawing book on his bed, fluttering them against that lump in the blankets.

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At the eatery Alb Indys chose for his repast, he found a small table in a quiet, comfortable corner where he sat facing the rear wall and an unoccupied chair. Toward the front of the one-room establishment was a large blackboard that enumerated the specialties being offered. But because of his distance from the blackboard, and a certain atmospheric

dimness of the place, only a single word in bold letters was easily readable. So he ordered that.

“Fish,” he said when the waitress arrived.

“Fish of the day?”

“Yes,” he had answered, mechanically and without a trace of the anticipation he thought he might feel.

But despite his lack of interest in daily meals, he did not regret this outing. A little lamp attached to the wall next to him, its light muffled by a grayish shade of some coarse fabric, created a nocturnal ambiance in the corner of the room where he sat. And it was not long before Alb Indys found that if he kept his gaze fixed upon a certain knotty plank in the wall just above the chair facing him, everything peripheral to his left eye's vision faded into a dark fog, while the little lamp to his right cast an island of illumination upon the table at which he was seated. This manipulation of his vision instilled in him the feeling that he was nestled in a glowing refuge somewhere in the darkness of an unknown hinterland. But he could not sustain the illusion. The state of mild delight into which he fooled himself faded, while shapes around him sharpened.

Yet without this sharpening would he have noticed the newspaper someone had left on the seat of the other chair? Messily bunched and repeatedly creased, it was still a welcome sight to his eyes. At this point he needed something to open his mind to the world around him, something to free his awareness of the coming night wherein he would have to face the verdict that would either terminate or terribly elongate his wakefulness. He reached for the pages, then unfolded and refolded them like an arrangement of bedcovers. His eyes followed dark letters across ruddy paper, and at last

his mind was out of its terrible school for a while. When the food arrived he made way for the plate, building a nest of print and pictures around it: advertisements for the town's shops and businesses, weather forecasts, happenings on the west shore, and a feature article entitled “THE REAL STORY OF DR. THOSS—Local Legend Revived.” A brief note explained that the article, written some years ago, was periodically reprinted when interest in the subject seemed, for one reason or another, newly aroused. Alb Indys paused over his meal for a moment and smiled, feeling disappointed and slightly relieved at the same time. It now appeared that he had been inspired by a misunderstanding, enlivened by imaginary consultations with a legendary doctor and his fictitious cures.

Who, then? What? When and why? According to the article, Thoss might well have been a real doctor, one who lived either in the distant past or whose renown was imported, by recollection and rumor, from a distant place. A number of people associated him with the following vague but lamentable tragedy. A superb physician, and a most respected figure in his community, was psychically deranged one night by some incident of indefinite character. Afterward he continued to make use of his training in physic but in an utterly new fashion, in a different key altogether from that of his former practice. This went on for some time before, violently, he was stopped. Decapitation, drowning in the nearby sea, or both were the prevailing conclusions to the doctor's legend. Of course, the particulars vary, as do those of a second, and more widely circulated, version.

This variant Dr. Thoss was a recluse of the witch-days, less a doctor of medicine than one deeply schooled at forbid-

den universities of the supernatural. Or was he naturally a very wise man who was simply misunderstood? Histories of the period are unhelpful in resolving such questions. No definite misbehavior is attributed to him, except perhaps that of keeping an unpleasant little companion. The creature, according to most who know *this* Thossian legend, is said to have possessed the following traits: it was smallish, "no bigger than a man's head"; shriveled and rotting, as if with disease or decomposition; spoke in a rasping voice or in several voices at once; and moved about by means of numerous appendages of special qualities, called "miracle claws" by some. There was good reason, the article went on, to put this abbreviated marvel at the center of this legend, for the creature may not have been merely a diabolical companion of Dr. Thoss but the mysterious doctor himself. Was his tale, then, a cautionary one, illustrating what happened to those who, either from evil or benevolent motives, got "into trouble" with the supernatural? Or was Dr. Thoss *itself* intended to serve as no more than a fancied agent of spectral hideousness, a bogey for children or a spook whose yarn is spun around a campfire? Ultimately the point of the legend is unclear, the article asserted, except as a means for fascinating the imagination.

But an even greater obscurity surrounded one last morsel of lore concerning who the doctor was and what he was about. It related to the way his name had come to be employed by certain people and under certain circumstances. Not the place for a scholarly inquest into regional expressions, the article merely cited an example, one that no doubt was already familiar to many of the newspaper's readers. This particular usage was based on the idea—and the follow-

ing verb must be stressed—of "*feeding* one's troubles to the sea (or 'wind') and Dr. Thoss," as if this figure—whatever its anatomical or metaphysical identity—were some kind of eater of others' suffering. A concluding note invited readers to submit whatever smatterings they could to enlarge upon this tiny daub of local color.

End of the real story of Dr. Thoss.

Alb Indys had read the article with interest and appetite, more than he ever hoped to have, and he now pushed both the crumpled newspaper and decimated meal away from him, sitting for a moment in blurry reflection on both. The surface of the old table, jaundiced by the little lamp above it, somehow seemed to be decaying in its grain, dissolving into a putrid haze. Possibly his mind had simply wandered too far when he heard, or thought he heard, a strange utterance. And it was delivered in a distorted, dry-throated voice, as though transmitted by garbled shortwave. "Yes, my name is Thoss," the voice had said. "I am a doctor."

"Excuse me, will there be anything else you'd like to order?"

Shaken back to life, Alb Indys declined further service, paid his bill, and left. On his way out, for no defensible reason, he scrutinized every face in the room. But none of them could have said it, he assured himself.

In any case, the doctor was now exposed as only a phantasm of local superstition. Or was he? To be perfectly honest about it, Alb Indys had to credit the nonexistent healer with some part of his present well-being. How he had eaten, and every bit! True, it was not much of a day—the town was a tomb and the sky its vault—but for him a secret sun was shining somewhere, he could feel it. And there were hours

remaining before it had to set, hours. He walked to the end of the street where it dipped down a hill and the sidewalk ended in a flight of old stone stairs that had curving grins sliced into them by time. He continued walking to the edge of town, and then down a narrow road which led to one of the few places he could abide outside his own room.

Alb Indys approached the old church from the graveyard side. As he closed in, he saw the great hexagonal peak, horn-like, projecting above brown-leafed trees. Surrounding the graveyard was a vertical barrier of thin black bars, with a thicker bar horizontally connecting them through the middle, spine-like. There was no gate, and the road he was on freely entered the church grounds. To his left and right were headstones and monuments. They formed a forest of memorials, clumps of crosses and groves of gravestones. Some of them were so tilted by the years that they looked as if they were about to topple over. But could one of them have just now fallen down entirely? Something was missing that seemed to have been there a moment ago. When Alb Indys reached the edge of the graveyard he turned around, surveying not only the markers themselves but also the spaces between them. And the wind was pulling at his fine pale locks.

Standing in full view of the church, Alb Indys could not resist elevating his gaze to the height of that spire which rose from the six-sided tower that crowned the edifice. This great structure—with its dark, cowl-shaped windows and broken Roman-numeral clock—was buttressed by two low-roofed transepts which squatted and slanted on either side of it. Beneath the cloud-filled sky the church was an even shade of grayish white, unblemished by shadows. And from behind

the church, where pale scrubby grasses edged toward a steep descent into sand and sea, came the sound of crashing waves, which Alb Indys perceived as somehow dry and electronic.

As always, there was no one else in the church at this time of day (and with hours remaining of it). Everything was very quiet and serenely lighted. The dark-paned windows along either wall confused all time, bending dawns into twilights, suspending minutes in eternity. Alb Indys slid his unrested body into a pew at the back. His eyes were fixed on the distant apse, where everything—pillars, pictures, pulpit—was partially folded within shadows that seemed to be the creation of dark hours. But his insomnia was not at issue here, nor the pernicious rancor that derived from it. His sufferings and transgressions alike were allowed reprieve. None of the devils and demons he had inserted into a certain collaboration of his would invade *this* church and violate its solemnity. He followed the moments as they tried to move past him. Each was smothered by stillness, and he watched them die. "But trouble feeds in the wind and hides in the window," he drowsily said to himself from somewhere inside his now dreaming brain.

Suddenly everything seemed wrong and he wanted to leave. But he could not leave, because someone was speaking to him from the pulpit. Yes, a pulpit in such a large church would be equipped with a microphone that amplified normal speech. Then why not speak normally—why whisper in such confused language and so rapidly, the effect being that of a single voice multiplying itself into many? What were the voices saying now? He could not understand them, as if he were hearing them in a dream. If only he could move, just

turn his head a little. And if only he could open his eyes and see what was wrong. The voices kept repeating without fading, echoing without end in what now seemed a fantastically spacious church. Then, with an effort sufficient to move the earth itself, he managed to turn his head to look out a window in the east transept. And without even opening his tightly closed eyelids, he saw what was in the window. But he suddenly awoke for an entirely different reason, because finally he understood what the voices were saying. They said they were a doctor, and their name was—

Alb Indys ran out of the church. And he kept running as if in flight from the hissing discord that now filled the seaside air, like static from a broken radio, and from what sounded like breaking waves close at his back. There was not much daylight left and he did not want to be caught in the damp and chill of an off-season evening. What misjudgments he had made that day, what mistakes, there was no question about it. An eternity of sleeplessness was to be preferred if those were the dreams sleep had in waiting.

And when Alb Indys reached his room, he was thinking about a gleaming crescent moon ready to be placed in a new scene. How thankful he was to have some project, however malicious in spirit, to fill the hours of that night. Exhausted, he threw his dark coat in a heap on the floor, then sat down on the bed to remove his shoes. He was holding the second one in his hand when he turned and, for some reason, began to contemplate that lump beneath his bedcovers. Without reasoning why, he elevated the shoe directly above this shapeless swelling, held it aloft for a few moments, then let it drop straight down. The lump collapsed with a little poof, as if it had been an old hat with no head inside. Enough of

this for one day, Alb Indys thought sleepily. There was work he could be doing.

But when he picked up the drawing book from where he had earlier abandoned it on the bed, he saw that the work he intended to do had, by some miracle, already been done. Yet it had not been done rightly. He looked at the drawing of the window, the drawing he had finished off earlier that day with his meticulous signature. Was it only because he was so tired that he could not recall darkening those window panes and carving that curved scar of moon behind them? Could he have forgotten about scoring that bone-white cicatrix into the flesh of night? But he was holding that particular moon in reserve for one of his collaborations and this was *n*ot one of those. This belonged to that other type of drawing: in these he penned only what was enclosed within the four-walled frame of his room, never anything outside it. Then why did he ink in this night and this moon, and with the collaboration of what other artistic hand? Something was gravely wrong. If only he were not so drained by chronic insomnia, all those lost dreams swishing around in his head, perhaps he could have thought more clearly about it. His dozing brain might even have noticed another change in the picture, for something now squatted in the chair beside the window. But there was too much sleep to catch up on, and, as the sun went out in the window, Alb Indys shut his eyes languorously and lay down upon his bed.

And he very well could have slept through what would usually be one of his white nights of insomnia had it not been for a noise that wakened him. The room was moderately brightened by a blade of moon whose light came through the window. The moonlight even made visible the

stuffed chair whose representation appeared in the drawing that had been meddled with. If only Alb Indys had examined the drawing more closely, he might have observed that something was crouching in that chair, that its softly packed arms had other arms overhanging them—two thin appendages that were now flexing in the room's faint luminescence. White night, white noise. As if speaking in static, a parched, crackling voice repeatedly croaked these words: *I am a doctor*. Then the roundish occupant of the chair hopped onto the bed with a single thrust, and its claws began their work, delivering the bedeviled artist to his miraculous remedy.

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It was the landlord who eventually found Alb Indys, though there was considerable difficulty identifying what lay on the bed. A rumor spread throughout the seaside town about a swift-acting and terrible disease, something that one of the tourists might have brought in. But no other trouble was reported. Much later, the entire incident was confused by preposterous fabulations which had the effect of relegating it to the doubtful realm of regional legend.

The Troubles Of Dr. Thoss (1989 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

First published in *Songs Of A Dead Dreamer*, 1985

When Alb Indys first heard the name of Dr. Thoss, he had some difficulty locating its speaker, or even discerning how many voices had spoken it. Initially the words seemed to emanate from an old radio in another apartment, for Alb Indys had no such device of his own. But he finally realized that this name had been uttered, in a rather harsh voice, just outside the corner window, and only window, of his room. After spending the night, not unusually, walking the floor or slumping wide-eyed in his only chair, he had been in bed since morning. Now, at mid-afternoon, he remained unslept and was still attired in pale gray pajamas. Bolstered by huge pillows, he was sitting up against the headboard. Upon his lap rested a drawing book filled with stiff sheets of paper, very white. A bottle of black ink was in reach on the sidetable next to his bed, and a shapely black pen with a sharp silvery nib was held tightly in his right hand. That Alb Indys was at that moment busy with a pen-and-ink rendering of the window, along with the empty chair beside it, was perhaps the chief reason that, very vaguely, he had overheard the words spoken beyond it.

He gave the drawing book a somewhat rough toss farther down the bed, where it fell against a lump swelling in the

blankets: more than likely the creation of a wadded pair of trousers or an old shirt, possibly both, given the habits of Alb Indys. The window was partly open and, walking over to it without steadiness, he discreetly pushed it out a little more. They should have been just below the window, those speakers whom Alb Indys wished would go on speaking. He remembered hearing a voice say, “It's going to be the end of someone's troubles,” or words to that effect, with the name of Dr. Thoss figuring in the discussion. The name was unfamiliar to him and gave rise to an enthusiasm that had much less to do with hope, which Alb Indys tried to keep at a minimum, than it did with pure nervous expectancy: the anticipation of new and unknown possibilities. But the talking had stopped, and just as he was becoming interested in this doctor. Where were they, those two? He was sure there were two, though there might have been a third. How could so many have simply vanished?

When he fully extended the window easement, Alb Indys saw no one on the street. He stretched forward for a better look and strands of blond hair, almost white, fell across his face, and then by a sudden salty breeze were blown back, thin and loose. It was not a very brilliant day, not one of excess activity. A few silhouettes and shadows maneuvered in the dimness on the other side of unreflecting windows. The stones of the street, so sparkling and picturesque for those enjoying a holiday here, succumbed to dullness out of season. Alb Indys fixed on one of them which looked dislodged in the pavement, imagining he heard it working itself free, creaking around in its stony cradle. But the noise was that of metal hinges squeaking somewhere in the wind. He quickly found them, his hearing made keen by insomnia. They were

attached to a wooden sign hung outside the upper-most window of an old building. The structure ascended in peaks and slants and ledges piled over ledges into the gray sky, until at its highest, turreted point swung the sign. Alb Indys could never clearly make out its four capital letters so far above, though he had gazed up at them a thousand times. (And how often it seemed that something gazed back at him from that high window.) But a radio station need not be a visual presence in an old resort town, only an aural landmark, a voice for vacationers signalling the “sound beside the sea.”

Alb Indys closed the window and returned to his thin-lined representation of it. Though he began the picture in the middle of a sleepless night, he did not copy the constellations beyond the window panes, keeping the drawing unmarred by any artistic suggestion of those star-filled hours. Nothing was in the window but the pure whiteness of the page, the pale abyss of unshut eyes. After making a few more marks on the picture, completing it, he signed his work very neatly in the lower right-hand corner. This page would later be put in one of the large portfolios which lay stacked upon a desk across the room.

What else was contained in these portfolios? Two sorts of things, two types of artwork which between them described the nature and limits of Alb Indys's pictorial talents. The first type included such scenes as the artist had recently executed: images drawn from his immediate surroundings, an immediacy that extended no farther than the sights observable in his own room. This was not his first study of the window, the subject he most often returned to and always in the same plain style. Sometimes he sat in the chair beside the window and portrayed his bed, lumpy and unmade, with oc-

casional attention to the sidetable (noting each nick that blemished its original off-white surface) and the undecorated lamp which stood upon it (recording each chip that pocked its glassy smoothness). The desk-side of the room also received its fair share of treatments: the wall at that end of the room was the most tempting of the four, in itself a subtle canvas that had been painted and pitted and painted again, coated and repeatedly scraped of infinitesimal, seatown organisms, leaving it shrivelled and pasty and incurably damp. No pictures were hung to patch either this or any other wall of the room, though a tall bookcase obscured who knows what unseen worlds behind it. Transitory compositions—a flung shoe leaning toe-up against a bedpost, a dropped glove which hazard endowed with a pointing index finger—formed the remaining examples of this first type of drawing in which the artist indulged.

And the second type? Was it more interesting that the first? Perhaps, though not where the imagination is concerned; because Alb Indys had none whatever, or at least none that he could readily make use of. Whenever he tried to form a picture of something, anything, in his imagination, all he saw was a blank: a new page with nothing on it, or perhaps a very old page that had retained the nothingness of its original mintage. Once he nearly had a vision of something, a few specks flying across a fuzzy background of white snow in a white sky—and there was a garbled voice which he had not intentionally conjured. But it all fizzled out after a few seconds into a silent stretch of emptiness. This artistic handicap, however, was anything but a frustration or a disappointment to Alb Indys. He did not often test the powers of his imagination, for he somehow knew that there was as

much to be lost as gained in doing so. In any case, there were other ways to make a picture, and we have already seen one of them, not a very unusual one. Here now is another.

This second method was a type of artistic forgery, though it might just as well be described by the term which Alb Indys himself preferred— collaboration. And who were his collaborators? In many instances, there was no way of knowing; anonymous penmen, mostly, of illustrations in very old books and periodicals, ones entirely forgotten. His shelves were full of them, dark and massive, their worn covers incredibly tender to the touch. French, Flemish, German, Swedish, Russian, Polish, any cultural source of published material would do as long as its pictures spoke the language of dark lines and vacant spaces. In fact, the more disparate the origins of these images, the better they served his purpose: because Alb Indys liked to take a century-old engraving of a subarctic landscape, studiously plagiarize its manner of suggesting icy mountains and a vast stretch of frozen whiteness; then select an equally old depiction of a cathedral in a town he had never heard of, painstakingly transport it stone by stone deep into the glacial wasteland; and finally, from still older pages, transcribe with all possible fidelity an unknown artist's conception of assorted devils and demons, making them dance down from the ice-mad mountains and invade the helpless cathedral. This was the typical process and product of his work with collaborators, who Alb Indys thought were actually in collaboration with one another and not with him at all. He was merely the inheritor of lost images; he was their resurrector, their invoker, their medium, and under his careful eye and steady hand there took place a mingling of artistic forms, their disparate anatomies tum-

bling out of the years to create the nightmare of his art. And it seemed perfectly natural to Alb Indys that, like everything else, even the most inviolable or obscure phenomena eventually find their way from good dreams into bad, or from bad dreams into the wholly abysmal.

At the moment he was working on a new collaboration, but all he had as yet was its barest beginnings: a sickle-shaped scar of moon, a common enough image which Alb. Indys wanted to remove from one black sky and fix in another. Its relocation could have provided him with a way to waste the rest of the afternoon. However, the commotion outside the window earlier had upset the pace of his day and given it a new rhythm. Almost any event could do this to an insomniac's delicate routine, so as yet there was no reason to contemplate the exceptional. An appearance by his landlord, whether rent-hungry or merely casual, sometimes altered his course for weeks to come. Before, his thoughts were of nothing, genuinely; but now old preoccupations had become stirred up and sharpened in his awareness. Was there anything special about this doctor, this Thoss? Alb Indys could not help wondering. Was he like the others or was he a doctor who would hear, really hear you? Not one had yet heard him, not one had offered him a remedy worth the name.

If there was a new doctor who had set up practice in the seaside town, Alb Indys could encounter none of the man's cures, either real or pretended, by staying at home. He needed to find some things out for himself, make inquiries, get out into the world. When was the last time he had had a good meal? Perhaps that would be a way to begin, and afterward he could take it from there. One could always get acceptable food at the place right around the corner, no reason

to fear, they were going to give him poison! Good, he thought. And after he ate he might have a nice walk for himself, gain some advantage from the fresh air and scenery of this town. After all, many people came here for vaguely therapeutic reasons, believing there were medicines dispensed by the very mood of the town's quaint streets and its sea-licked landscape. It might even happen that his maladies would disappear of their own accord, leaving him with no need for this doctor, this Thoss.

He dressed himself in dark, heavy clothes and made sure to lock the door behind him. But he had forgot to shut the window properly and a breeze edged in, disturbing the pages of the drawing book on his bed, fluttering them against that lump in the blankets.

*

At the restaurant Alb Indys found a small table in a quiet, comfortable corner, where he sat facing the rear wall and an empty chair. He ordered something to eat from a large board, nicely lettered, which was propped up on an easel at the front of the room. Because of his distance from this board, and a certain atmospheric dimness of the place, only a single word in bold letters was easily readable.

“Fish,” he had said.

“Fish of the day?”

“Yes,” he had answered, mechanically and without a trace of the anticipation he thought he might feel.

But despite his enduring lack of interest in daily meals, he did not regret this outing. A little lamp attached to the wall next to him, its light muffled by a grayish shade of some coarse fabric, created a slightly nocturnal ambiance. If he

kept his gaze fixed upon a certain knotty plank in the wall, at a point just above the empty chair opposite him, everything peripheral to his left eye's vision faded into a dark fog, while the little lamp to his right cast an island of illumination upon the table before him, instilling the illusion that he was lost in some glowing and isolated corner of an endless night. But he could not sustain the illusion: the state of mild delight into which he fooled himself faded, while shapes around him sharpened.

Yet without this sharpening would he have noticed the newspaper someone had left behind on the seat of that empty chair? Messily hunched and repeatedly creased, it was still a welcome sight to his eyes. At this point he needed something of this kind,something to peruse in the rich glow of the lamp that was guiding him through an artificial night, preparing him for the authentic one in which he would have to face the unpredictable verdict which either terminated or terribly elongated his wakefulness. He reached for the pages, rustled them, unfolded and refolded them like an arrangement of bedcovers. His eyes followed dark letters across ruddy paper, and at last his mind was out of its terrible school for a while. When the food arrived he made way for the plate, building a nest of print and pictures around it: advertisements for the town's shops and businesses, weather forecasts, happenings on the west shore, and a feature article entitled “THE REAL STORY OF DR. THOSS—Local Legend Revived.” A brief note explained that the article, written some years ago, was periodically reprinted when interest in the subject seemed, for one reason or another, newly aroused. Alb Indys paused over his meal for a moment and smiled, feeling disappointed and slightly relieved at the same

time. It now appeared that he had been inspired by a misunderstanding, by imaginary consultations with a legendary doctor and his fictitious cures.

Who, then? What? When and why? His name, according to the article, may indeed have been that of a real doctor, one who lived either in the distant past or whose renown was imported, by recollection and rumor, from a distant place. A number of people associated him with the following vague but poignant tragedy: an excellent physician, and a most respected figure in the community, was psychically deranged one night by some incident of indefinite character; afterward he continued to make use of his training in physic but in a wholly new fashion, in a different key altogether from that of his former practice. This went on for some time before, violently, he was stopped. Decapitation, drowning in the nearby sea, or both were the prevailing conclusions to the real doctor's legend. Of course, the particulars vary, as do those of a second, and more widely circulated, version.

This variant Dr. Thoss was a recluse of the witch-days, less a doctor of medicine than one deeply schooled at forbidden universities of the supernatural. Or was he naturally a very wise man who was simply misunderstood? Histories of the period are unhelpful in resolving such questions. No definite misbehavior is attributed to him, except perhaps that of keeping an unpleasant little companion. The creature, according to most who know this Thossian legend, is said to possess the following-traits: it is smallish, “no bigger than a man's head”; shrivelled and rotting, as if with disease or decomposition; speaks in a rough voice; and moves about by means of numerous appendages of special qualities, called “miracle claws” by some. There was good reason, the article

went on, to put this abbreviated marvel at the center of this legend, for the creature may not have been merely a diabolical companion of Dr. Thoss but the mysterious doctor himself. Was his tale, then, a cautionary one, illustrating what happened to those who, either from evil or benevolent motives, got "into trouble" with the supernatural? Or was Dr. Thoss i*tself* intended to serve as no more than an agent of spectral hideousness, a bogie for children and the secluded campfire? Ultimately the point of the legend is unclear, the article asserted, beyond evoking a certain uneasiness in those of superactive imagination.

But an even greater obscurity surrounded one last morsel of lore concerning who the doctor was and what he was about. It related to the way his name had come to be employed by certain people and under certain circumstances. Not the place for a scholarly inquest into regional expressions, the article merely cited an example, one that no doubt was already familiar to many of the newspaper's readers. This particular usage was based on the idea —and the following verb must be stressed—of "*feeding* one's troubles to the sea (or 'wind') and Dr. Thoss," as if this figure—whatever its anatomical or metaphysical identity—were some kind of eater of others' suffering. A concluding note invited readers to submit whatever smatterings they could to enlarge upon this tiny daub of local color.

End of the real story of Dr. Thoss.

Alb Indys had read the article with interest and appetite, more than he ever hoped to have, and he now pushed both crumpled newspaper and decimated meal away from him, sitting for a moment in blurry reflection on both. The surface of the old table, jaundiced by the little lamp above it,

somehow seemed to be decaying in its grain, dissolving into a putrid haze. Possibly his attention had simply wandered too far when he heard, or thought he heard, a strange utterance. And it was delivered in a distorted, dry-throated voice, as though transmitted by garbled shortwave. “Yes, my name is Thoss,” the voice had said. “I am a doctor.”

“Excuse me, will there be anything else you'd like to order?”

Shaken back to life, Alb Indys declined further service, paid his bill, and left. On his way out, for no defensible reason, he scrutinized every face in the room. But none of them could have said it, he assured himself.

In any case, the doctor was now exposed as only a phantasm of local superstition. Or was he? To be perfectly honest about it, Alb Indys had to credit the nonexistent healer with some part of his present well-being. How he had eaten, and every bit! True, it was not much of a day—the town was a tomb and the sky its vault—but for him a secret sun was glowing somewhere, he could feel it. And there were hours remaining before it had to set, hours. He walked to the end of the street where it dipped down a steep hill and the sidewalk ended in a flight of old stone stairs that had curving grins sliced into them. He continued walking to the edge of town, and then down a narrow road which led to one of the few places he could abide outside his own room.

Alb Indys approached the old church from the graveyard side and, as he closed in, only the great hexagonal peak, hornlike, could be seen projecting above the brown-leafed trees. Surrounding the graveyard was a barrier of thin black bars, with a thicker bar connecting them through the middle, spinelike. There was no gate, and the road he was on

freely entered the church grounds. To his left and right were headstones and monuments, little marble slabs and golden plaques. They formed a forest of memorials, clumps of crosses and groves of gravestones. Some of them were very small and oddly shaped, and so loosened by time that they almost seemed to rock back and forth in the wind. But could one of them have just now fallen down entirely? Something was missing that had been there before, seemingly had sunk or slid away. Alb Indys watched for a moment, then proceeded toward the church. When he reached the edge of the graveyard he turned around, surveying not only the stones themselves but also the spaces between them. And the wind was pulling at his fine pale locks.

Standing in full view of the church, Alb Indys could not resist elevating his gaze to the height of that spire which rose from a square central tower whose four corners put out four lesser points. This great structure—with its dark, cowl-shaped windows and broken roman-numeraled clock—was buttressed by two low-roofed transepts which squatted and slanted on either side of it. Beneath the cloud-filled sky the church was an even shade of grayish white, unblemished by shadows. And from behind the church, where pale scrubby grasses edged toward a steep descent into sand and sea, came the sound of tossing waves, a hissing sound which Alb Indys perceived as somehow dry and electronic.

As always, there was no one else in the church at this time of day (and with hours remaining of it). Everything was very simple inside, very solemn and quiet and serenely lighted. The dark-paned windows along either wall confused all time, bending dawns into twilights, suspending minutes in eternity. Alb Indys slid into a pew at the back and rested

his hands at his sides. His eyes were fixed on the distant apse, where everything—pillars, pictures, pulpit—appeared as an unfocused fragment of itself, folded within shadows that seemed to be the creation of dark hours. But his insomnia was not at issue here: suffering and transgressions alike were reprieved in this place that shut out time. He followed each moment as it tried to move past him: each was smothered by the stillness, and he watched them die. “But trouble feeds in the wind and hides in the window,” he drowsily said to himself from somewhere inside his now dreaming brain.

Suddenly everything seemed wrong and he wanted to leave, but he could not leave because someone was speaking from the pulpit. Yes, a pulpit in such a large, such an enormous, church would be equipped with its microphone, but then why whisper in such confused language and so rapidly, like a single voice trying to be more? What were the voices saying now? No, he would rather not hear, because now everything was happening that he wished would not happen, and it was so late at night, and with so many hours left to sleep, finally to sleep for hours and hours, he would not be able to get away in time. If he could only move, just turn his head a little. And if he could only get his eyes to open and see what was wrong. The voices kept repeating without fading, multiplying in the fantastically spacious church. Then, with an effort sufficient to move the earth itself, he managed to turn his head just enough to look out a window in the east transept. And without even opening his tightly closed eyelids, he saw what was in the window. But he suddenly awoke for an entirely different reason, because finally he under-

stood what the voices were saying. They said they were a doctor, and their name was—

Alb Indys had to get home, even if all the way there the sound of the sea was hissing behind him like a broken radio, and even if the wind rushed by his ears like breaking waves of air. There was not much daylight left and tonight, of all nights, he did not want to catch anything, did not want to be caught, that is, in the damp and chill of an off-season sundown. What misjudgments he had made that day, what mistakes, there was no question about it. And what a doctor to call upon to treat one's troubles...

An eternity of sleeplessness was to be preferred, if those were the dreams sleep had in waiting. Gratefully he would hold on to his old troubles, with the permission of the world, the wind, and the legendary Dr. Thoss.

And when Alb Indys reached his room, he was thinking about a gleaming crescent moon ready to be placed in a new scene, and he was thankful to have some project, any project, to fill the hours of that night. Exhausted, he threw his dark coat in a heap on the floor, then sat down on the bed to remove his shoes. He was holding the second one in his hand when he turned and, for some reason, began to contemplate that lump he had left in the bedcovers. Without reasoning why, he elevated the shoe directly above this shapeless swelling, held it aloft for a few moments, then let it drop straight down. The lump collapsed with a little poof, as if it had been an old hat with no head inside, or a magician's silk scarf that only seemed to have a plump white dove hidden under it. Enough of this for one day, Alb Indys thought sleepily, there was work he could be doing.

But when he picked up the drawing book of stiff clean pages from where he had earlier abandoned it on the bed, he saw that the work he intended to do had, by some miracle, already been done. He looked at the drawing of the window, the drawing he had finished off earlier that day with his meticulous signature. Was it only because he was so tired that he could not recall darkening those window panes and carving that curved scar of moon behind them? Could he have forgotten about scoring that bone-white cicatrix into the flesh of night? But he was holding that particular moon in reserve for one of his "collaborations" and this was not one of those. This belonged to that other type of drawing: he only penned, in these, what was enclosed within the four-walled frame of his room, never anything outside it. Then why did he ink in this night and this moon, and with the collaboration of what other artistic hand? If only he were not so drained by chronic insomnia, all those lost dreams hissing in his head, perhaps he could have thought more clearly about it. His dozing brain might even have noticed another change in the picture, for something now squatted in the chair which formerly had been unoccupied. But there was too much sleep to catch up on, and, as the sun went out in the window, Alb Indys shut his eyes languorously and lay down upon his bed.

And he never would have wakened that night, which seemed as white as winter, if it had not been for the noise. The window was lit up by a silvery blade of moon. It brightened the chair, whose two thin arms had other arms overhanging each of them, flexing slowly in the room's stillness. White night, white noise. As if speaking in static, the parched, crackling voice repeatedly said: *I am a doctor*. Then

the occupant of the chair hopped gracefully onto the bed with a single thrust of its roundish body, and its claws began their work, delivering the sleeper to his miraculous remedy...

It was the landlord who eventually found him, though there was considerable difficulty identifying what lay on the bed. A rumor spread throughout the seaside town about a swift and terrible disease, something that perhaps one of the vacationers had brought in. But no other trouble was reported. Much later, the entire incident was confused by preposterous elaborations, which had the effect of relegating all of its horrors to the doubtful realm of regional legend.

The Fabulous Alienation of the Outsider, being of no fixed Abode (1994 The Agonizing Resurrection Of Victor Frankenstein Version)

First published in *Fantasy and Terror #5*, 1985 (as part of 'Selections Of Lovecraft')

The outsider lifts his shadow-wearied eyes and gazes about the moldy chamber where, to his knowledge, he has always lived. He has no recollection of who he is or how he came to dwell so far removed from others of his kind who, he reasons, must exist, perhaps in that world above which he vividly recalls, though he glimpsed it only once and long ago.

One night the outsider emerges from his underground domain and, guided solely by the glowing moon he has never really seen before, scrambles down a dark road, searching for friendly lights and, he hopes, friendly faces.

Eventually he comes upon a large, festively illuminated house. At first he peeks shyly through the windows at the partiers inside; but soon his unbearable longing for the society of others, along with a barely evolved sense of etiquette, liberate him from all hesitancies. Locating an unlocked door, he crashes the affair.

Inside the house—a structure of gorgeous, Georgian decor—everyone screams and flees at the first sight of the outsider. After only a few seconds of recognition and companionship, this recluse by default is once again left to keep his own company. That is to say, he has been abandoned to the company of that untimely horror which initially set those gay and fine-looking people so indecorously on their heels. “What was it?” he asks himself, posing the question over and over with seemingly infinite repetition before finally collecting wits to squint a little to one side. “What was it?” he asks for the infinite time add one or two. “It was you,” answers the mirror. “It was you.”

Now it is the outsider's turn to make his getaway from that hideous living corpse of unholy and unwholesome familiarity, that thing which had imperfectly decomposed in its subterranean resting place. He seeks refuge in a chaotic dreamworld where no one really notices the dead and no one even looks twice at the disgusting.

Eventually, however, he tires of this deranged, though unhostile, dimension of alienage. His heart more pulverized than simply broken, he decides to return to the subhumous envelope from which he never should have strayed, there to reclaim his birthright of sloth, amnesia, and darkness. A period of time passes, indefinite for the outsider though decisive for the balance of the world's population.

For reasons unknown, the outsider once more drags his bulky frame earthwards. Arriving exhausted in the superterranean realm, he finds himself standing, badly, in neither darkness nor daylight, but some morbid transitional phase between the two. A senile sun throbs with deadly dimness, and every living thing on the face of the land has been

choked by desolation and by an equivocal gloom which has perhaps already lasted millenia, if not longer. The outsider, a thing of the dead, has managed to outlive all those others whom, either from madness or mere loss of memory, he would willingly seek out to escape a personal void that seems to have existed prior to astronomy.

This possibility is now, of course, as defunct as the planet itself. With all biology in tatters, the outsider will never again hear the consoling gasps of those who shunned him and in whose eyes and hearts he achieved a certain tangible identity, however loathsome. Without the others he simply cannot go on being himself—for there is no longer anyone to be outside of. In no time at all he is overwhelmed by this atrocious paradox of fate.

In the middle of this revelation, a feeling begins to well up in the outsider, an incalculable sorrow deep inside. From the center of his being (which now is the center of all being that remains in existence) he summons a suicidal outburst of pain whose force shatters his rotting shape into innumerable fragments. Catastrophically enough, this antic, designed to conclude universal genocide, gives off such energy that the distant sun is revived by a transfusion of warmth and light.

And each fragment of the outsider cast far across the earth now absorbs the warmth and catches the light, reflecting the future life and festivals of a resurrected race of beings: ones who will remain forever ignorant of their origins but for whom the sight of a surface of cold, unyielding glass will always hold profound and unexplainable terrors.

The Fabulous Alienation Of The Outsider, Being Of No Fixed Abode (1985 Fantasy And Terror Version)

First published in *Fantasy And Terror #5*, 1985 as a section of *Selections Of Lovecraft*, which consists of three parts, later included in *The Agonizing Resurrection Of Victor Frankenstein And Other Gothic Tales*

The outsider lifts his shadow-wearied eyes and gazes about the moldy chamber where, to his knowledge, he has always lived. He has no recollection of who he is or how he came to dwell so far removed from others of his kind who, he reasons, must exist, perhaps in that world above which he vividly recalls, though he glimsed it only once and long ago.

One night the outsider emerges from his underground domain and, guided solely by the glowing moon he has never really seen before, scrambles down a dark road, searching for friendly lights and, he hopes, friendly faces.

Eventually he comes upon a large, festively illuminated house. At first he peeks shyly through the windows at the partiers inside; but soon his unbearable longing for the society of others, along with a barely evolved sense of etiquette, liberate him from all hesitancies. Locating an unlocked door, he crashes the affair.

Inside the house—a structure of gorgeous, Georgian decor—everyone screams and flees at the first sight of the out-

sider. After only a few seconds of recognition and companionship, this recluse by default is once again left to keep his own company. That is to say, he has been abandoned to the company of that untimely horror which initially set those gay and fine-looking people so indecorously on their heels. “What was it?” he asks himself, posing the question over and over with seemingly infinite repetition before finally collecting wits to squint a little to one side. “What was it?” he asks for the infinite time add one or two. “It was you,” answers the mirror. “It was you.”

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In the middle of this revelation, a feeling begins to well up in the outsider, an incalculable sorrow deep inside. From the center of his being (which now is the center of all being that remains in existence) he summons a suicidal outburst of pain whose force shatters his rotting shape into innumerable fragments. Catastrophically enough, this antic, designed to conclude universal genocide, gives off such energy that the distant sun is revived by a transfusion of warmth and light.

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The Blasphemous Enlightenment of Prof. Francis Wayland Thurston of Boston, Providence, and the Human Race (1994 The Agonizing Resurrection Of Victor Frankenstein Version)

First published in *Fantasy And Terror* #5, 1985, as part of 'Selections Of Lovecraft'

In the late 1920s Prof. Thurston is putting a few final touches to a manuscript he intends no other person ever to lay eyes on, so that no one else will have to suffer unnecessarily in the way he has this past year or so. When it's all done with, he just sits in silence for a few moments in the library of his Boston home (summer sunlight wandering over the oak walls), and then he breaks down and weeps like a lost soul for the better part of the day, letting up later that night.

Prof. Thurston is the nephew of George Gammell Angell, also a professor (at Brown U., Providence, PJ), whose archaeological and anthropological unearthings led him, and after his death led his nephew, to some disturbing conclusions

concerning the nature and fate of human life, with implications universal even in their least astounding aspects.

They discovered, positively, that throughout the world there exist savage cults which practice strange rites: degenerate Eskimos in the Arctic, degenerate Caucasians in New England seaport towns, and degenerate Indians and mulattoes in the Louisiana swamps not far from Tulane University, New Orleans. The two professors also discovered that the primary aim of these cults is to await and welcome the return of ante-prehistoric monstrosities which will unseat the human race, overrun the earth, and generally have their way with our world.

These beings are as detestably inhuman as humanly imaginable, though no more so. From the common individual's viewpoint their nature is one of supreme evil and insanity, notwithstanding that the creatures themselves are indifferent to, if not totally unaware of, such mundane categories of value.

From the beginning of time they have held a certain attraction for persons interested in pursuing an existence of utter chaos and mayhem; that is, one of complete liberation at all conceivable levels.

After learning the designs these beings have on our planet, Prof. Thurston just assumes he will be murdered to keep him quiet on the subject, as his uncle and others have been. (And to think that at one point in his investigation he was planning to publish his findings in the journal of the American Archaelogical Society!) All he can do now is wait.

For some reason, however, the followers of the Great Old Ones (as the extraterrestrial entities are referred to) never follow through, and Prof. Thurston appears to escape assas-

sination, at least for an indefinite period of time. But this is of little comfort, because knowing what he knows, Prof. Thurston is the most miserable being on earth. He grieves for his lost dream of life, and even the skies of spring and flowers of summer are a horror to his eyes. It goes without saying that he now finds even the simplest daily task a joyless requisite for survival and no more.

After months of boredom and a personal devastation far worse than any worldwide apocalypse could possibly be, he decides to return to his old job at the university. Not that he believes any longer in the hollow conclusions of his once beloved anthropology, but at least it would give him a way to occupy himself, to lose himself. Still, he continues to be profoundly despondent and his looks degenerate beyond polite comment.

“What's wrong, Prof. Thurston?” a student asks him one day after class. The professor glances up at the girl. After only the briefest gaze into her eyes he can see that she really cares. “Amazing,” he thinks. Of course there is no way he could tell her what is really wrong, but they do talk for a while and later take a walk across the campus on a clear autumn afternoon. They begin to see each other secretly off campus, and with graduation day behind them they finally get married, their ceremony solemn and discreet.

The couple honeymoons at a picturesque little town on the seacost of Massachusetts. To all appearances, several sublime days pass without one ripple of grief. One day, as he and his bride watch the sun descend into a perfectly unwrinkled ocean, Prof. Thurston almost manages to rationalize into nonexistence his dreadful knowledge. After all, he tells himself, there still exist precious human feeling and hu-

man beauty (e.g. the quaint little town) created by human hands. These things have been perennially threatened by disorder and oblivion. Anyway, all of it was bound to end somehow, at sometime. What difference did it make when the world was lost, or to whom?

But Prof. Thurston cannot sustain these consoling thoughts for long. All during their honeymoon he snaps pictures of his smiling wife. He loves her dearly, but her innocence is tearing him apart. How long can he conceal the terrible things he knows about himself, about her, and about the world? Even after he takes a picture, this wonderful girl just keeps smiling at him! How long can he live with this new pain?

The problem continues to obsess him (to the future detriment, he fears, of his marriage). Then, on the last night of the honeymoon, everything is resolved.

He awakens in darkness from a strange dream he cannot recall. Outside the window of the bedroom it sounds as though the whole town is in an ambivalent uproar—hysterical voices blending festival and catastrophe. And there are weirdly colored lights quivering upon the bedroom wall. Prof. Thurston's wife is also awake, and she says to her husband: “The new masters have come in the night to their chosen city. Have you dreamed of them?” There passes a moment of silence. Then, at last, Prof. Thurston answers his wife with the long, abandoned howl of a madman or a beast, for he too has dreamed the new dream and, without his conscious knowledge or consent, has embraced the new world.

And now nothing can hurt him as he has been so cruelly hurt in the past. Nothing will ever again cause him that pain

he suffered so long, an intolerable anguish from which he could never have found release in any other way.

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The Premature Death of H. P. Lovecraft, Oldest Man in New England

H.P. Lovecraft, the last great writer of supernatural horror tales, has just died of stomach cancer at the age of 46 in a Providence, Rhode Island, hospital. He died alone and with no particular expression on his face. Upon the nightstand next to his bed are a few books and many handwritten pages in which Lovecraft recorded the sensations of his dying. (These latter are later lost, to the dismay of scholars.)

Two nurses came into the room and are the first to discover that the gentleman in the private room has, not unexpectedly, passed away. They have already seen death many times in their nursing careers (they're both quite young), and neither is alarmed. They know nothing can be done for the dead man. One of them says: “Open a window, it's stuffy in here.” “Sure is,” replies the other. A crisp mid-March breeze freshens the room.

“Well, there's no more that can be done for him,” comments the first nurse. Then she asks: “Do you remember if he had a wife or anybody that visited him?” The other nurse shakes her head negatively, then adds: “Are you kidding? He's not exactly the husband type. I mean, just take a look at *that face*, will you.’” The first nurse nods positively. She makes a humorous remark about the deceased, and then both nurses leave the room smiling.

But apparently neither of them noticed the fantastic and frightening thing which occurred right before their eyes:

H.P. Lovecraft, for only the shortest-lived moment, had faintly—just ever so, no more—smiled back at them.

The Premature Death of H.P. Lovecraft, Oldest Man in New England (1994 The Agonizing Resurrection Of Victor Frankenstein Version)

First published in *Fantasy And Terror #5*, 1985, as a section of *Selections Of Lovecraft*

H.P. Lovecraft, the last great writer of supernatural horror tales, has just died of stomach cancer at the age of forty-six in a Providence, Rhode Island, hospital. He died alone and with no particular expression on his face. Upon the nightstand next to his bed are a few books and many handwritten pages in which Lovecraft recorded the sensations of his dying. (These notes are later lost, to the dismay of scholars.)

Two nurses come to look in on the gentleman in the private room and are the first to discover that he has, not unexpectedly, passed away. They have already seen death many times in their nursing careers, though they're still quite young, and neither is alarmed. They know nothing can be done for the dead man. One of them says: “Open a window, it's stuffy in here.”

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The Worthy Inmate of the Will of the Lady Ligeia (1994 The Agonizing Resurrection Of Victor Frankenstein Version)

First published in *Fantasy And Terror #5*, 1985

The Lady Ligeia is a woman of great beauty—dark hair, high forehead, striking eyes—and also great learning. Her husband, a man of only average looks and accomplishments, shares in her studies of occult wisdom, and to him it sometimes seems that he and his wife are treading on the bounds of forbidden knowledge. From the very beginning there was perhaps something extraordinary about their marriage pact. (For instance, Ligeia kept her last name a secret from her mate, and he never pressed the issue, never questioned this arrangement.) When the Lady Ligeia is dying from an unknown disorder, her husband still doesn't understand what she sees in him. He feels unworthy of her love, which is incomprehensibly intense; he feels it is entirely unmerited.

When living, the Lady Ligeia often spoke of the will to conquer death, the will to survive its terrible, seemingly inevitable victory. Ligeia's widower appears to share these sentiments, and after her death he begins a new life with Lady Rowena Trevanion, of Tremaine, a blue-eyed blonde woman from a distinguished English family. However, not long into

his second marriage he shuts himself away in a secluded room of bizarre decor: nightmarish colors, garish appointments, and weird, restless tapestries. There he recklessly jeopardizes his mental balance with drugs and strange dreams. His physical well-being doesn't sustain any serious damage (he's as fit as he ever was), but his second wife's health, like her predecessors suddenly and inexplicably seems to be declining.

He sees Lady Rowena suffer a series of relapses and recoveries, until to his eyes she has at last wasted away altogether, and dies in that secluded and fantastically renovated chamber. Her lifeless form lies before him, but all he can think about is his first wife, his lost love, Ligeia.

By design, that strange room he built for himself is perfect for dreaming in, and now he is dreaming quite strenuously, dreaming with every ounce of his will about his first wife, the Lady Ligeia. He also takes an immoderate amount of opium as an aid to his dreaming. At the same time the corpse of his second wife. Lady Rowena, seems to be exhibiting incredible signs of revived life—color in the face, faint pulsing of the heart—which then disappear, only to reappear after a brief interval. This occurs off and on throughout the night and culminates in the supernatural resurrection not of Lady Rowena, but of the Lady Ligeia, whom the widower of both ladies has dreamed back to life, supplying the body of his second wife to accommodate the first.

But the resurrection is an illusory one. Lady Rowena is, in fact, not dead; nor is the Lady Ligeia alive. For all his efforts, their husband hadn't dreamed either of them anywhere but has succeeded only in dreaming himself out of one world and into another. Through this exercise of will he has finally

merited the love of the dark woman whose raven hair is now spreading from the shadows of her shroud. He has willed himself into her domain, from which no one ever escapes and which is the very source of the will itself.

And now they are both locked forever in the formless phantasmagoria from which emanates innumerable echoes of each gory and passionate throb of the Heart Divine. Best of all, Ligeia has her husband back.

"Oh Rowena, Rowena," he screams. But nobody—never mind the blonde, blue-eyed widow—can hear him now.

The Transparent Alias of William Wilson, Sportsman and Scoundrel (1994 The Agonizing Resurrection Of Victor Frankenstein Version)

First published in *Fantasy And Terror* #5, 1985

William Wilson has a namesake who looks exactly like him, walks like him, and is equal in any game of wits. They first meet at Dr. Bransby's school for boys, in England. There Wilson's namesake is constantly thwarting his designs, challenging his superior status among their peers, and on the whole making things difficult for him. Hounded beyond all human endurance, William Wilson one night takes leave of the school, aborting his academic career but at least ridding himself of his obnoxious twin.

Later on, however, Wilson's namesake intrudes upon his life at the most inopportune times: to put a damper on his debauched parties at Eton by reminding him that immoderate and late hours are bad for the soul; to expose his cheating at cards at Oxford; and overall to meddle in his nefarious affairs in most of the major cities of Europe (including, of all places, Moscow). Eventually there is a showdown with swords between the two William Wilsons, and William

Wilson, the original, wins. Before he dies, the bloodied namesake utters the awesome pronouncement that William Wilson has killed only himself, not to mention all hopes of ever becoming a sane and decent individual. Of course Wilson realizes that his twin was right all along, and soon after this regrettable duel he sits down to write the tragic story of his life as an apology and perhaps a warning to others.

While he's writing, there's a knock at the door. At first Wilson doesn't bother to answer it (write, Wilson, write), but the knocking is so persistent that he finally does. Standing in the doorway, dripping wet from the storm outside and suddenly illuminated by a flash of lightning, is William Wilson's namesake, back from the dead.

“May I come in?” he asks. Wilson steps aside in amazement and allows the gory twin to enter. He has some trouble scrounging up a chair for his guest (the house was rented cheap but isn't much on furnishings), though at last he turns up a small unvarnished stool, which the other Wilson checks for splinters before sitting down.

“I've found out a few things since the last time we saw each other,” Wilson's namesake begins. “You'll recall that I was always admonishing you to change your ways and so on and so forth? Well, I know now that my efforts were actually quite pointless. There was nothing I could do or you could do or anyone else.”

“No,” protests Wilson. “It was my own will,” he insists, “and nothing else which condemned me.”

“I'm afraid you are wrong, so wrong,” continues Wilson's exasperated namesake, shaking his bloodstained head. “It's not just you, it's everyone. You're just a little fish, my friend.

You think you were out to get yourself, you think you were perverse. I don't want to play the alarmist, but I've been some places and seen some things and believe me there's nothing but perversity. The machinery of this place operates entirely on the principle of friction, my friend."

"I've lost the hope of heaven," interjects William Wilson. "Heaven, forget heaven," replies the namesake. "Heaven will be when the big, brainless William Wilson has torn everything up so bad that it'll have to suck the whole mess back in and start over. The point I want to make here is that now that we know what we're up against, maybe we can make our peace and perhaps be of some comfort to each other. This is a really unique opportunity. Maybe—"

But William Wilson will not hear any more of this insanity. He's already suffered enough at the hands of his twin. Taking up his sword, Wilson attacks the specter and savagely hacks him to bits. ("There's my peace with you!" he shouts.) Then he goes around feeding the hunks of flesh to the dogs in the neighborhood, all the while admiring the simple hunger of the devouring beasts.

William Wilson soon afterward starves to death, for when he returns home he finds that the thought of what he's done won't let him stop laughing long enough to take any nourishment, or even a drink of water.

The Interminable Residence of the Friends of the House of Usher (1994 The Agonizing Resurrection Of Victor Frankenstein Version)

First published in *Fantasy And Terror #6*, 1994 as part of 'A Selection Of Poe'

A man of average height and features has just managed to escape the House of Usher only seconds before it collapses full force deep into the murky waters of the adjacent tarn. The man runs under a nearby tree, seeking refuge from the violent storm which began and consummated that evening's catastrophe. Once there, however, he looks up and notes that the tree is leafless. (Its limp branches are flowing freely in the wind and even its roots, unearthed, are waving around.)

The man of average height and features was spending a few days at the House of Usher at the invitation of a friend and former classmate, Roderick, who along with his twin sister, Madeline, owned the house and a fair amount of surrounding property, including a graveyard. Roderick immediately impressed his childhood friend as a very sick man. Only the softest sounds, the dimmest light, and a generally

immobile routine could be tolerated by his morbidly keen senses and nervous system.

Still, the two friends managed to keep themselves entertained by reading rare books of occult lore, and sometimes Roderick would play, however quietly, unusual melodies on his guitar. Roderick also tries to explain some unusual theories which lately have obsessed his supersubtle mind, theories about his relationship to the house and to his twin sister. But at the time Roderick's friend doesn't really understand all this.

The visitor at the House of Usher is at first appalled by the desolate countryside, the unwholesome appearance of the tarn, and the shocking, if not dangerous, condition of the house itself. After a while, though, these striking abnormalities cease to affect him the way they once did. When Roderick announces that Madeline has died, he helps the bereaved brother inter the deceased twin without asking any questions. (She had a rosy flush on her face!) Life at the House of Usher is then carried on as usual by its two remaining residents. This state of affairs begins to decay when one night there's a storm which upsets Roderick to the point of hysteria. His housemate tries to calm him down by reading from a storybook. But Roderick is inconsolable and now claims that the two of them locked Madeline in the family crypt while she was still alive. His friend is unnerved by this outburst. He had no idea things were so bad. This was madness!

Even worse, Roderick is proved to be telling the truth when his sister staggers into the room, falls upon her twin, and they both end up as a lifeless heap on the floor. The man of average height and features barely manages to get out of

the house before that too goes down. He stares at the empty lot where the House of Usher used to be, and then he turns away to seek a haven far removed from the site of this terrible ordeal.

But before he can take a single step he realizes that there is no longer anyplace he can go, no longer anyone who will have him. Oh, the books, the shadows, and the horrible entombment of that poor girl. How did he ever get into this one! While the Ushers were effortlessly delivered to their doom by the hereditary freaks and weaknesses of their family, he came to the house, and stayed, of his own free will, and by the same will, without asking a single question, he too must now be consumed by the tarn whose diseased waters await his embrace.

The Unnatural Persecution, by a Vampire, of Mr. Jacob J. (1994 The Agonizing Resurrection Of Victor Frankenstein Version)

First published in *Fantasy And Terror #7*, 1985

A young schoolteacher, who writes a little poetry on the side, is coming home to the boardinghouse where he lives on the top floor. A red-haired girl, one of his pupils, runs up to him just as he steps onto the old boardinghouse stairway.

“Have you heard about the vampire, Mr. Jacob ?” she asks him, squinting in the bright afternoon sunlight. The girl goes on to describe the vampire and its activities as they in turn have been related to her, principally from eyewitness accounts. “Of course, I know all that,” replies Mr. Jacob. “Well, see you tomorrow,” he says crushing a cigarette underfoot. (He doesn't like his students to see him smoking if he can help it.)

That night Mr. Jacob can't sleep. He knows this business with the vampire is just nonsense, but in the middle of the night certain things can get on your nerves that normally you wouldn't think twice about. He drags himself out of bed and opens the only window in his room. How quiet everything is at this hour. Somehow it seems as if he's just noticed this for the first time.

The next day the reports about the vampire are verified by several honest and reliable persons. The body of a man from out of town was found that morning in his hotel room —drained of blood. Mr. Jacob, along with many others, concurs that he felt something strange was up the last few days... something, well, something he couldn't exactly put his finger on.

Tonight Mr. Jacob is taking no chances. He sits by the sole window in his room hour after hour with a large crucifix across his lap. Every little while he forgets himself and dozes off, but each time he manages to startle his mind back to alertness with just one thought about the vampire.

As the days go by, the situation worsens. Many more bodies are found drained of blood. Mr. Jacob hasn't had a decent rest since this terrible season of death began. All night long he sits gazing deep into the darkness beyond that idiotic little window. And he's smoking too much. One day he coughs up some blood into his hand—right in the middle of a grammar lesson!

Due to the inherent limits of the human will, Mr. Jacob falls sound asleep one night by the window. Maybe he is only dreaming when he hears these little taps on the glass, but he wakes up just the same. “No,” he screams, leaping from the chair and knocking the crucifix to the floor. He is shivering violently, as if some icy wind has rushed into the room and is tearing its way straight through him. But there is no wind. Outside the window all is quiet and dead.

The next day there is good news. The vampire has moved on, everyone is safe once more. Mr. Jacob opens his window for the first time in weeks on a radiant morning in early spring. Children are singing for joy in the street. He sud-

denly closes the window and turns back toward his little room.

For Mr. Jacob knows that everyone is suffering from a false sense of security. He stays on his guard. Night upon night he waits by the window, thinking one day the vampire will return... But for some reason she never does.

Late that summer nobody in town is surprised to hear that one evening Mr. Jacob lost his balance and fell onto the street far below. He'd started drinking heavily, poor man. An unfortunate mishap... and just as autumn semester was to begin!

The Superb Companion of Andre de V., Anti-Pygmalion (1994 The Agonizing Resurrection Of Victor Frankenstein Version)

First published in *Fantasy And Terror #7*, 1985

Tonight, as he stands smoking a cigarette and staring out his window upon a hazy avenue, M. Andre de V. has accomplished the supreme feat of the romantic dreamer. From only the slightest experience with a real woman—Mlle. LeMieux, the pursuit of whom would have been a futility—he has fashioned an ideal one of his imagination.

She is seated in a corner of the room: wise, beautiful, and content, she is the perfect complement to her creator's temper and the unflawed realization of his unspeakably complex prerequisites. He smiles at her and she smiles back, faultlessly reflecting both the kind and degree of sentiment in the original smile. This and similar experiments have helped M. Andre de V. pass a great deal of time recently.

Later that night a letter is delivered to the room of M. Andre de V. He pours himself a brandy, lights his last cigarette (he forgot to buy some that afternoon), and opens the envelope with a sharp, silvery letter-opener.

Dear Andre (the letter begins):
There's some rather sad news tonight, though maybe not so

sad from your point of view. Mlle. LeMieux has finally succumbed to her illness. (Did you even know she was sick?) As she was among our circle of acquaintances, I thought you would like to know.
P.S. How's your new play coming along?

M. Andre de V. reads the letter about a dozen times, until the message really sinks in. Then, still holding the letter in his hand, he returns to his position at the window. Without turning toward the phantasm in the corner, he says to it: “Go away! Please go away. There's not much point anymore.”

But the beautiful specter does not disappear as commanded. Having already sensed its maker's unspoken desire, she takes the sharp letter-opener from where he left it on the table and buries it deep in the back of his soft neck.

The Scream: From 1800 to the Present (1994 The Agonizing Resurrection Of Victor Frankenstein Version)

First published in *Fantasy And Terror #7*, 1985

Near the close of the eighteenth century, William B. is approaching his destination of a saloon on Boston's waterfront. As he passes through a narrow alleyway someone jumps him from behind and wraps a length of thin but strong rope around his neck.

While he is being choked to death he looks up and can see the moon over the tall shops and houses lining the alley. He knows he is going to die and cannot believe the injustice of it on almost every level: that he should die before he'd had a drink that night, that he should die without realizing a single one of the marvelous dreams which had sustained his life in the first place.

In his final moments he would have settled for the small satisfaction of releasing a scream to relieve somewhat the purely physical anguish of being strangled to death. But his murderer, an expert waylayer, is pulling the rope too tight and not a sound is able to escape from William B.‘s throat. Later that night a pack of huge wharf rats nibbles the body before it is discovered by some local prostitutes.

The spirits of murder victims are notorious avengers. They are well-known for lingering in the human world and “walking the earth” in search of their slayers. Suppose, however, the spirit has no idea what its murderer looks like? The spirit could haunt the scene of violence and perhaps nearby areas, hoping to pick up some gossip, a chance lead; but beyond this there isn't much that can be done.

The spirit has such a marvelous revenge planned: to let loose its terrible scream, now an instrument of supernatural ferocity and horror, into the face of its murderer, killing him in one of the worst ways imaginable. But the strangler is never found. Eventually the passing years exceed the longest possible human life span. The murderer has undoubtedly been dead for some time. And how many years still remain to the spirit, haunted by its unfulfilled quest for vengeance!

The spirit happens to settle in a secluded but very pleasant looking home, where undisturbed and undisturbing it watches the generations come and go. Always, though, the spirit feels the suppressed scream it carries inside and the hopelessness of finding someone for whom this scream of his would mean something.

The spirit has a lot of time to think and wonder why he has never met others in a state similar to his. This would be some compensation. But the idea, like the passing generations, comes and goes and is never pursued very diligently. His mind hasn't really been clear at all since those last lucid moments of dying.

Toward the end of the twentieth century the spirit begins paying midnight visits to a beautiful and apparently lonely girl who lives in the house of well-preserved seclusion. It

seems she has fallen in love with the apparition that keeps her company in the dark hours of her solitude.

The spirit is now thankful for its fate, realizing that it is his anguished and imprisoned scream sustaining his presence. While he has the scream within him he can stay on earth and be seen. He now holds it inside like something extremely precious.

One night the spirit is keeping his appointment by the girl's bedside when he sees it's all been a mistake: the girl is neither lonely nor in love with him, though she is more beautiful than ever. And someone else is lying next to her in the bed.

This is both a torment and a relief for the spirit. Finally he has a reason to let go of his terrible scream, finally it will mean something. It would annihilate the both of them while they slept. “Did you hear something?” the man sleepily asks the girl. “Just barely,” she replies with her eyes still closed. “Go back to sleep,” whispers the man. “It was probably nothing.”

And it was nothing. For the spirit now suffers the horrific revelation that after so many years the scream itself has died its own death, and has left him not only utterly alone, but also completely imperceptible behind his private wall of eternity.

The Perilous Legacy of Emily St. Aubert, Inheritress of Udolpho (1994 The Agonizing Resurrection Of Victor Frankenstein Version)

First published in *Fantasy And Terror #7*, 1985

Emily St. Aubert has had a very difficult life. When only a young woman she sees the death of both her parents: her mother, whom Emily finds out was not her real mother, and her wise father, whom Emily adored. “O Emily, O Emily,” cries her boyfriend Valancourt when she is carted off by the menacing Montoni to the somewhat broken down but nonetheless imposing castle named Udolpho.

At Udolpho there are a multitude of secrets: secret passages, secret stairways, secret motives, secret murders, tracks of blood from secret persons, moans from secret chambers, from secret nightmares, Italian secrets, Italian love, Italian hate and revenge.

At one point Emily sees the wax replica of a corpse with a worm-eaten face which she takes to be real. And it might as well have been. Eventually Emily is rescued by Valancourt, delivered from Udolpho, and not long afterwards the pair are married. But complications arise.

Emily and Valancourt seem made for each other. Both have been through quite a lot but neither has been poisoned by their sorrow, their suffering, or by months spent deep in the midst of vice. Their simple, everyday natures remain unharmed and intact.

At night, however, Valancourt lies awake in bed, involuntarily eavesdropping on the things Emily unknowingly whispers in her sleep: secret things. After a few weeks of this, Valancourt is looking very haggard. In a matter of months he is hopelessly insane, and one day goes running off for parts unknown.

Emil now spends much of her time alone. To occupy herself she writes poems, as she has always done, atmospheric little pieces like “To Melancholy”, “To the Bat”, “To the Winds”, and “Song of the Evening Hour.”

Sometimes she cannot help asking herself if she was not deceived from the very start about the virtues of Valancourt. Why, he was no better nailed together than that crumbling old castle of Montoni's. That awful, terrible place.

What was its name again? Ah, yes... Udolpho.

The Ever-Vigilant Guardians of Secluded Estates (1994 The Agonizing Resurrection Of Victor Frankenstein Version)

First published in *Fantasy And Terror #7*, 1985 as 'The Ever-Vigilant Guardians of Secluded and Opulent Estates'

A young man with a sparse mustache is sitting in a large chair in the innermost chamber of his large house, where all his life he has lived well in solitude off the fortunes made by his ancestors. For him, simply drifting among rooms of dreamy half-lights kills the better part of any given day.

Tonight, however, he is disturbed by certain mental images he is not used to experiencing: brightly lit places, crowds of people, and soft laughter. "Well, what do you think of that?" he thinks, or perhaps even says out loud.

Now an old servant walks into the room, and the young man watches him as he sets down a drink in a glass of finely carved crystal. The young man hasn't asked for this refreshment but he takes a few sips anyway, just out of pure courtesy to the thoughtful old domestic. The servant stands by, and the young man keeps an eye on him. When the servant bends down to collect the empty glass, the young man detects a slightly sour odor and seems to be viewing the ser-

vant's gaunt face for the very first time. For some reason he is horrified by the sight.

“I think I'll go out tonight,” says the young man as he makes a deliberately impulsive bound to his feet. “Where will you go?” asks the servant in a quiet voice. “That's no business of yours, now is it?” answers the young man. “Where will you go?” the servant repeats, a total lack of expression on his old servant's face.

“Insolent old fool,” thinks the young man as he steps into the next room. But the next room is exactly like the one he has just left. And seated in a chair before him is a young man with a sparse mustache.

At this rate neither of us will ever make it out the front door, he thinks. And it was too late anyway. Long ago it was already too late, sighs the old servant as he drifts through his hell of dreamy half-lights on his way to fetch the new master a drink he did not ask for.

The Eternal Devotion of the Governess to the Residents of Bly (1994 The Agonizing Resurrection Of Victor Frankenstein Version)

First published in *Fantasy And Terror #7*, 1985

The Governess is writing an account of her experiences at Bly, where she had charge of two parentless children by the names of Flora and Miles. She was hired for the job by the children's uncle, who had an office in Harley Street and with whom the governess fell hopelessly in love during the course of a very brief interview.

The governess writes of her arrival at Bly, of her amazement at the two beautiful children, and of her resolve to devote herself body and soul to the upbringing in hopes that someday her devotion would be reciprocated by the man in Harley Street.

The governess now writes of the horrors at Bly: how the ghosts of two former retainers, Miss Jessel and Peter Quint, are trying to possess the souls of the children and through them perpetuate the unholy romantic alliance that this notorious twosome carried in life.

The governess sees these horrible fiends outside windows, in the shadows at the foot of a stairway, and across the serene waters of a pond. But she conquers her terror; at all costs she must protect the children!

The governess thinks she has prevailed over the evil spirits. The children are to leave Bly, and it only remains to pack up Miles in the coach where his sister now waits for him. The dead, however, are very tenacious and do not easily give up the pleasure of unexpectedly appearing at windows.

Inside the house Miles is standing fixed with fear when the governess comes to collect him. Staring at him through the paned windows of a pair of French doors is the face of Quint, while hovering over him is the face of the governess, and each is making a bid for the boy's soul. But Miles' soul is already shattered beyond repair, wrecked. Tragically the ensuing struggle causes his heart to stop beating. He lies dead in the arms of the governess.

With a great feeling of pain and loss the governess finishes her memoir of that dreadful episode at Bly. Despite the catastrophic outcome of her first position as a governess she will manage to secure employment at other houses. And she will live, in good health, to a ripe old age.

But the man from Harley Street never comes, handsome little Miles is dead, and the governess will not see Bly again... as long as she lives.

The Agonizing Resurrection of Victor Frankenstein, Citizen of Geneva (1994 The Agonizing Resurrection Of Victor Frankenstein Version)

First published in *Songs Of A Dead Dreamer*, 1985

Victor Frankenstein has died on board a ship caught in seas of ice near the North Pole. His body has been sent back to his native Switzerland, where, however, there is no one to receive it. Everyone he ever knew has already died before him. His brother William, his friend Henry, his wife Elizabeth, and his father Alphonse Frankenstein, among others, are no more. A minor official in the Geneva civil service comes up with the suggestion to donate the corpse, still very well preserved, to the university at Ingolstadt, where the deceased distinguished himself in scientific studies.

Hans Hoffmann, a prodigy in comparative anatomy at the University of Ingolstadt, is conducting a series of experiments in his apartment. He has assembled, and is quite sure he can vivify, a human being from various body parts he has bought or stolen. To consummate his project, which to his knowledge has never been attempted and would certainly make him famous, he still needs a human brain. He has

heard that the body of a former student at the university at Ingolstadt is preserved in the morgue of the medical school. He has heard that the man was a brilliant student. This would be the perfect brain, thinks Hans Hoffmann. Late one night he breaks into the morgue and helps himself.

“Well,” says Hans Hoffmann on the spectacular evening when the creature first opens its eyes, “aren't you a beauty!” This is intended ironically, of course; the creature is quite hideous. What Hans Hoffmann now notices is that the creature is gazing around the room, as if expecting to see someone who, for the moment, is absent.

“Oh ho,” says the scientist, “I can see I'm going to have trouble with you. You'll be begging me one of these days to make you a companion, someone of your own kind. Well, look here,” says Hans Hoffmann holding a handful of entrails and part of a woman's face. “I've already tried to do it, perhaps a little halfheartedly, I admit. It's not the same, making a woman, and I don't have much use for them anyway.”

Hans Hoffmann cannot tell whether or not the creature has understood these words. Nevertheless, it has an extremely desolate expression on its face (just possibly due to a few collapsed muscles). Now the creature is staggering around Hans Hoffmann's apartment, inadvertently breaking a number of objects. Finally, it stumbles out the door and into the streets of Ingolstadt. (“Good riddance!” shouts Hans Hoffmann).

But as the creature wanders into the darkness, searching for a face it remembers from long ago, it is unaware that the only being in the entire universe who could possibly offer

him any comfort has already incinerated himself on a furious pyre deep in the icy wasteland of the North Pole.

The Excruciating Final Days of Dr. Henry Jekyll, Englishman (1994 The Agonizing Resurrection Of Victor Frankenstein Version)

First published in *Songs Of A Dead Dreamer*, 1985

Dr. Henry Jekyll has been locked in his laboratory off a busy London bystreet for almost a week now, trying to find the formula that would destroy the insatiable Edward Hyde forever, or at least dissolve him into a few chemicals harmlessly suspended in one's system. Late Sunday morning Dr. Jekyll awakens on the floor and discovers, to his amazement, the shrunken form of Hyde stirring half-consciously beside him.

They are both a little groggy, and Dr. Jekyll is the first to make it to his feet. For a moment they just stare at each other. Dr. Jekyll can see that Hyde's ferocious being has been rendered innocuous and tame, the lingering effects, no doubt, of his debauched life.

“I have just the thing,” says Dr. Jekyll, cradling Hyde's head with one arm and forcing a beaker of bubbling fluid to his lips. Then Dr. Jekyll backs away and watches Hyde being

overtaken by wrenching convulsions from the poison he has unwittingly ingested.

Someone is now knocking at the laboratory door (the one that leads into the house). “Dr. Jekyll, sir, there's a young lady here asking for Mr. Hyde. What should I tell her?”

“Just a minute, Poole,” answers Dr. Jekyll, smoothing out his crumpled cravat and preparing to deliver the regrettable news that Hyde died days ago in an unfortunate accident of science. The man would drink anything he could get his hands on, and he knew nothing of chemistry!

But before seeing the young lady, Dr. Jekyll wants to examine the corpse of his evil twin. *My God, this poor creature is practically immortal*, he thinks as he drags the faintly gasping body of Edward Hyde toward the gaping and fiery incinerator.

The Heart of Count Dracula, Descendant of Attila, Scourge of God (1994 The Agonizing Resurrection Of Victor Frankenstein Version)

First published in *Songs Of A Dead Dreamer*, 1985

Count Dracula recalls how he was irresistibly drawn to Mina Harker (nee Murray), the wife of a London real estate agent. Her husband had sold him a place called Carfax. This was a dilapidated structure next door to a noisy institution for the insane. Their incessant racket was not undisturbing to one who was, among other things, seeking peace. An inmate named Renfield was the worst offender.

One time the Harkers had Count Dracula over for the evening, and Jonathan (his agency's top man) asked him how he liked Carfax with regard to location, condition of the house and property, and just all around. “Ah, such architecture,” said Count Dracula while gazing uncontrollably at Mina, “is truly frozen music.”

Count Dracula is descended from the noble race of the Szekelys, a people of many bloodlines, all of them fierce and warlike. He fought for his country against the invading Turks. He survived wars, plagues, the hardships of an isol-

ated dwelling in the Carpathian Mountains. And for centuries, at least five and maybe more, he has managed to perpetuate, with the aid of supernatural powers, his existence as a vampire. This existence came to an end in the late 1800's. “Why her?” Count Dracula often asked himself.

Why the entire ritual, when one really thinks about it. What does a being who can transform himself into a bat, a wolf, a wisp of smoke, anything at all, and who knows the secrets of the dead (perhaps of death itself) want with this oily and overheated nourishment? Who would make such a stipulation for immortality! And, in the end, where did it get him? Lucy Westenra's soul was saved, Renfield's soul was never in any real danger... but Count Dracula, one of the true children of the night from which all things are born, has no soul. Now he has only this same insatiable thirst, though he is no longer free to alleviate it. “Why her? There were no others such as her.” Now he has only this painful, perpetual awareness that he is doomed to wriggle beneath this infernal stake which those fools—Harker, Seward, Van Helsing, and the others—have stuck in his trembling heart. “Her fault, her fault.” And now he hears voices, common voices, peasants from the countryside.

“Over here,” one of them shouts, “in this broken down convent or whatever it is. I think I've found something we can give those damned dogs. Good thing, too. Christ, I'm sick of their endless whining.”

The Insufferable Salvation of Lawrence Talbot the Wolfman (1994 The Agonizing Resurrection Of Victor Frankenstein Version)

First published in *Songs Of A Dead Dreamer*, 1985

According to ritual the wolfman has just been shot with a silver bullet by the one who loved him, and whom he loved. He falls to the ground and a thick layer of autumn leaves absorbs much of the impact. The woman is still pointing the revolver—using both hands—when the others in the hunting party arrive, summoned by the gunshots they heard.

A tall man in a tweed sportcoat puts his arms around the woman. “Don't worry, he can't harm you anymore,” the tall man says to her. But the wolfman never even touched the woman to begin with. Literally.

Lawrence Taylor was the human name of the wolfman. He was in his late thirties, unemployed (with prospects), and unmarried. While traveling through Eastern Europe, hiking about forests much of the time, he was attacked by a large wolf and bitten once or twice. After being examined by a doctor, he didn't give the incident a great deal of thought... until the following month, when he saw the full moon through the diamond-paned windows of an English country house where he was a guest.

He had fallen in love with the daughter of the man who owned the house, and he was secretly intending to ask her to marry him. But after the first full moon opened his eyes to what he had become, he knew his life was over. He was a murderer, however involuntarily. Before the next full moon he made the woman promise that if anything should happen to him, well, his one wish was to be interred in the mausoleum on the grounds of her father's estate. “I promise,” she said solemnly, though she understood neither the promise itself, nor the solemnity with which she uttered it.

Lawrence Talbot wanted to know he would still be close to this woman after his death. But he never imagined that he would also be able to hear her voice, and other voices, while unfortunately being unable to respond.

“Aren't we supposed to cut out its heart now?” asked one of the men in the hunting party. (Well, so what if they do? He loved her with every part of himself and would still be capable of sensing her presence on the frequent visits she would undoubtedly make to the mausoleum.) “No, nothing to do with the heart,” says another. “I think we're supposed to burn up the whole thing right away, and then scatter the ashes.”

“Yes, that's quite true,” adds the tall man. “But what do you say?” he asks the woman. She is weeping, “I don't know, I don't know. What does it matter anymore?” (No, it does! The promise, the promise!)

Some of the men complain about how hard it is to turn up decent tinder in a forest where it has rained so much that autumn. Every leaf, every twig they find seems to be slick and damp, as if each one has been stained with some beast's oily slobber.

The Intolerable Lesson of the Phantom of the Opera (1994 The Agonizing Resurrection Of Victor Frankenstein Version)

First published in *Songs Of A Dead Dreamer*, 1985

The Phantom of the opera is a genius. Before he became the phantom of the opera he was a composer of only average talent, a talent that was taken advantage of by a greedy swindler who stole the young composer's music. He tried to get revenge on the villain, and in the process his face was severely disfigured by some chemicals which splashed into it and caught fire. Afterward he moved into the sewers directly beneath the opera house, and he also became a genius.

In the middle of the opera season the phantom kidnaps a rather mediocre soprano and devotes many weeks to training her voice down in the resonant caverns of the Paris sewer system. He tells the girl to sing from the heart, rapping his chest once or twice to make her aware she is singing from his heart too, and maybe other people's. This is the basic message of his instruction, though he still exasperates his student with hours and hours of scales, ear training, and so forth.

One day she gets fed up with all the agony this man is putting her through, and out of despair, not to mention curi-

osity, rips off the mask that hides his hideous face. She screams and faints. While she is passed out, the phantom takes this opportunity to return her to the upper world of the opera house. For whether she knows it or not, she is now a great singer.

When the girl regains consciousness from the terrible shock she experienced, her days with the phantom of the opera seem like no more than a vague dream. Later in the season she is starring in an opera and gives a brilliant performance, which the phantom watches from an empty box near the stage. Over and over he raps his chest with satisfaction and a sadness so personal and deep as to be incomprehensible to anyone but himself.

After the opera is finished and the star is taking her bows, the phantom notices that one of the heavy walkways above the stage is loose and about to come plummeting down right on his student's lovely head. He leaps onto the boards, pushes her out of the way, and is himself thoroughly crushed by the falling wreckage.

The phantom of the opera is bleeding freely and behind his mask his eyes are drowning. “Who's that?” someone asks the girl whom the phantom of the opera taught to sing so well. “I'm sure I don't know!” she answers as her strange and tormented teacher dies.

But her words do not contain a hint of the inexplicable emotion she feels. Only now will she really be able to sing from the heart. But she realizes there is no music on earth worthy of her voice, and later that night her monstrously heavy heart takes her to the bottom of the Seine. The phantom of the opera is a genius.

The Unbearable Rebirth of the Phantom of the Wax Museum (1994 The Agonizing Resurrection Of Victor Frankenstein Version)

First published in *Songs Of A Dead Dreamer*, 1985

The Phantom of the wax museum is walking down the street with his new girlfriend. Even though he is wearing a benignly handsome face, which he designed himself, there remains something repellent and sinister in his appearance. “No decent girl would go out with him,” mutters an old woman as the couple passes by.

The phantom of the wax museum was once a gentle and sensitive artist who worked very hard, shaping beautiful life-like representations of figures from history and from modern times. A prosperous craftsman with no head for finance, he was cheated by his business partner and left for dead in a burning studio, where his masterpieces in wax melted one by one into nothing.

He, however, escaped, though in a badly disfigured condition, and from that day on he was mentally deranged, a sadistic demon artist who every so often submerged young women in vats of boiling wax and afterward displayed them for

profit to the unsuspecting patrons of his museum. “A genius!” the public exclaimed.

The phantom of the wax museum is about to press the button that will cause his new girlfriend, presently unconscious, to descend into one of those famous bubbling vats. But quite unexpectedly some plainclothes detectives burst into the room and stop him. They rescue the girl and corner her would-be killer at the top of the stairs, just above the eagerly gurgling vat.

Suddenly, in this moment of great stress, the phantom of the wax museum sees a gentle and sensitive face in his mind's eye. He remembers now, he remembers who he was so long ago. In fact, he remembers precious little else. What was he doing and who were these people at the top of those stairs.

“I beg your pardon,” he starts to say to the detectives, “could you please tell me—” But the youngest of the detectives is a little quick to fire his gun, and the evil phantom of the wax museum goes over the rail, disappearing beneath the creamy surface of the furiously seething vat.

One of the older detectives stares down into the busy pool of wax and in a rare reflective moment says: “If there's any justice in this life, that monster'll boil for eternity. He killed at least five lovely girls!”

But at the moment of his death the fortunate phantom of the wax museum could remember only one girl: his beautiful Marie Antoinette, which he'd finished a few hours ago, or so it seemed, and which he knew he would never see again.

The Greater Festival of Masks (2010 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

First published in *Songs Of A Dead Dreamer*, 1985

There are only a few houses in the part of town where Noss begins his excursion. Nonetheless, they are spaced in such a way that suggests there had once been a greater number of them that filled out the landscape, like a garden that seems sparse merely because certain growths have withered and others have not yet been planted to replace them. It even occurs to Noss that these hypothetical houses, counterfactual at present, may at some point change places with those which now exist, in order to bestow on the visible a well-earned repose within nullity. For by then they will have served their purpose as features that gave the town an identity. And now is just the season for so many things to pass into emptiness and make way for other entities and modes of being. Such are the declining days of the festival, when the old and the new, the real and the imaginary, truth and deception, all join in the masquerade.

But even at this stage of the festival some have yet to take a large enough interest in tradition to visit one of the shops of costumes and masks. Until recently Noss was among this group. Finally, though, he has decided to visit an establishment whose shelves spill over with costumes and masks, even at this late stage of the festival.

In the course of his little journey, Noss keeps watch as buildings become more numerous, enough to make a street, many narrow streets, a town. He also observes manifold indications of the festival season. These are sometimes baffling, sometimes blatant in nature. For instance, not a few doors have been left ajar, even throughout the night, as if to challenge callers or intruders to discover what waits within. And dim lights are left to burn in empty rooms, or rooms that appear empty if one does not approach their windows with an incautious curiosity and look inside. Less dire are those piles of filthy rags deposited in the middle of certain streets, shredded rags that are easily disturbed by the wind and twist gaily about. At every turn, it seems, Noss comes upon some gesture of festive abandonment: a hat, all style mangled out of it, has been jammed into the space where a board is missing in a high fence; a poster stuck to a crumbling wall has been diagonally torn in half, leaving a scrap of face fluttering at its edges; and into strange pathways of caprice revelers will go, but to have *shorn* themselves just anywhere, to have littered the shadows of doorways and alleys with wiry clippings and tumbling fluff. Reliquiae of the hatless, the faceless, the impetuously groomed. As Noss walks on, he takes only a desultory interest in the sportive occasion he is witnessing for the first time since he settled in this place.

But he becomes more interested as he approaches the center of town, where the houses, the shops, the fences, the walls are more, much more… close. There seems barely enough space for a few stars to squeeze their bristling light between the roofs and towers above, and the outsized moon —not a familiar face in this neighborhood—must suffer to be

seen only as a fuzzy anonymous glow mirrored in silvery windows. The streets are more tightly strung here, and a single one may have several names compressed into it from end to end. Some of the names may be credited less to deliberate planning, or even the quirks of local history, than to an apparent need for the superfluous. Perhaps a similar need may explain why the buildings in this district exhibit so many pointless embellishments: doors which are elaborately decorated yet will not budge in their frames; massive shutters covering blank walls behind them; enticing balconies, well-railed and promising in their views, but without any means of entrance; stairways that enter dark niches... and a dead end. These structural adornments are mysterious indulgences in an area so pressed for room that even shadows must be shared. And so must other things. Backyards, for example, where a few fires still burn, the last of the festival pyres. For in this part of town the season is still at its peak, or at least the signs of its termination have yet to appear. Perhaps celebrants hereabouts are still nudging each other provocatively, still engaging in preposterous escapades they would not ordinarily dare to imagine, and, in general, indulging themselves as if there were no tomorrow. Here the festival is not dead. For the delirium of this celebration does not radiate out from the center of things, but seeps inward from remote margins. Thus, the festival may have begun in an isolated hovel at the edge of town, if not in some forlorn residence in the woods beyond. In any case, its agitations have now reached the heart of this dim region where Noss is about to visit one of the many shops of costumes and masks.

A steep stairway leads him to a shrunken platform of a porch, and a thin door puts him inside the shop whose

shelves indeed spill over with costumes and masks. To Noss, these shelves also seem reticent in a way hard to pinpoint, stuffed into silence by wardrobes and faces of dreams. Warily, he pulls at a mask that is over-hanging a high shelf. A heap of them fall down on his head. Backing away from the avalanche of false faces, he looks at the sardonically grinning one in his hand.

“Brilliant choice,” says the shopkeeper, who steps out from behind a counter at the back of the shop. “Put it on and let's see. Yes, my gracious, this is excellent. You see how your entire face is well-covered, from the hairline to just beneath the chin and no farther. And at the sides it clings snugly. It doesn't pinch, am I right?” The mask nods in agreement. “Good, that's how it should be. Your ears are unobstructed—you have very nice ones, by the way—in case someone calls out to you while your face is concealed by the mask. It is comfortable, yet secure enough to stay put and not fall off in the heat of activity. You'll see, after a while you won't even know you're wearing it! The holes for the eyes, nostrils, and mouth are perfectly placed for your features. No natural function is inhibited, that is a must. And it looks so good on you, especially up close, though I'm sure also at a distance. Go stand over there in the moonlight. Yes, it was made for you, what do you say? I'm sorry, what?”

Noss walks back toward the shopkeeper and removes the mask.

“I said all right. I suppose I'll take this one.”

“Fine, as if there were any question about it. Now let me show you some of the other ones, just a few steps this way.”

The shopkeeper pulls something down from a high shelf and places it in his customer's hands. What Noss now holds

is another mask, but one that somehow seems to be... impractical. While the first mask he chose possessed every virtue of conformity to its wearer's face, this mask is neglectful of such advantages. Its surface is uneven, with bulges and depressions which appear unaccommodating at best, and possibly pain-inflicting. And it is so much heavier than the one he picked himself.

"No," says Noss, handing back the mask, "I believe the other will do."

The shopkeeper looks as if he is at a loss for words. He stares at Noss for many moments before saying: "May I ask a personal question? Have you lived, how shall I say this, *here* all your life?"

The shopkeeper is now gesturing beyond the thick glass of the shop's windows. Noss shakes his head in reply.

"Well, then there's no rush. Don't make any hasty decisions. Stay around the shop and think it over, there's still time. In fact, it would be a favor to me. I have to go out for a while, you see, and if you could keep an eye on things I would greatly appreciate it. You'll do it, then? Good. And don't worry," he says, taking a large hat from a peg that poked out of the wall, "I'll be back in no time, no time at all. If someone pays us a visit, just do what you can for them," he shouts before closing the front door behind him.

Now alone, Noss takes a closer look at the shelves stocked with the other kind of mask the shopkeeper had shown him. How different they were from what he conceived a mask should be. Every one of them shared the same impracticalities of shape and weight, as well as having some very oddly placed apertures for ventilation, and too many of them. Outlandish indeed! Noss gives these new masks back to the

shelves from which they came, and he holds on tightly to the one that the shopkeeper had said was so perfect for him, so practical in every way. After a vaguely exploratory amble about the shop, Noss finds a stool behind the counter and there falls asleep.

It seems only a few moments later that he is awakened by some sound or other. Collecting his wits, he gazes around looking for its source. Then the sound returns, a soft thudding at the rear of the shop. Hopping down from the stool, Noss passes through a narrow doorway, descends a brief flight of stairs, passes through another doorway, ascends another brief flight of stairs, walks down a short and very low hallway, and eventually arrives at the shop's back door. It rumbles again once or twice.

“Just do what you can for them,” Noss remembers. But he looks uneasy.

“Why don't you come around the front?” he shouts through the door. There is no reply, however, only a request.

“Please bring out five of those masks to us. We're just across the yard at the back of the shop. There's a fence. And a fire on the other side. That's where we are now. Well, can you do this or not?”

Noss leans his head into the shadows by the wall: one side of his face is now in darkness while the other is indistinct, blurred by a strange glare which is only an impostor of true light. “Give me a moment, I'll meet you there,” he finally replies. “Did you hear me?”

There is no response from the other side. Noss opens the door a little and peers out into the backyard of the shop. What he sees is a patch of scruffy ground surrounded by the tall wooden slabs of a fence. On the other side of the fence is

a fire, though not a large one, just as the voice said. But whatever signs of pranksterism Noss perceives or is able to fabricate to himself, there is no defying the traditions of the festival, even if one can claim to have merely adopted this town and its seasonal practices, however *rare* they may be. For innocence and excuses are not harmonious with the spirit of this fabulously infrequent occasion. Compliantly, then, Noss retrieves the masks and brings them to the rear door of the shop. Cautiously, he steps out.

When he reaches the far end of the yard—a much greater distance from the shop than it had seemed—he sees a reddish glow of fire through the cracks in the fence, which has a door leaning loose on its hinges and only a hole for a handle. Setting on the ground the masks he is carrying, Noss squats down and peers through the hole. On the other side of the fence is a dark yard exactly like the one on his side, save for the fire burning there. Gathered around the blaze are several figures—five, perhaps four—with hunched shoulders and spines curving toward the light of the flames. They are all wearing masks which at first seem securely fitted to their faces. But one by one these masks appear to loosen and slip down, as if each is losing hold upon its wearer. Finally, one of the figures pulls his mask off completely and tosses it into the fire, where it curls and shrinks into a wad of bubbling blackness. The others follow this action when their time comes. Relieved of their masks, the figures resume their shrugging stance. But the light of the fire now shines on four, yes four, smooth and faceless faces.

"These are the wrong ones, you little idiot," says someone whom he had not noticed standing in the shadows. And Noss can only stare dumbly as a hand snatches up the masks

and draws them into the darkness. “We have no more use for *these*!” the voice shouts.

Noss runs in retreat toward the shop, the five masks striking his narrow back and falling face-up on the ground. For he has gained a glimpse of the speaker in the shadows and now understands why *those* masks are no good to them now.

Once inside the shop, Noss leans upon the counter to catch his breath. Then he looks up and sees that the shopkeeper has returned.

“There were some masks I brought out to the fence. They were the wrong ones,” he says to the shopkeeper.

“No trouble at all,” the other replies. “I'll see that the right ones are delivered. Don't worry, there's still time. And how about you, then?”

“Me?”

“And the masks, I mean.”

“Oh, I'm sorry to have bothered you in the first place. It's not at all what I thought. That is, maybe I should just—”

“Nonsense! You can't leave now. Give me your trust, and I'll take care of everything. I want you to go to a place where they know how to handle cases like this. You're not the only one who is a little frightened tonight. It's right around the corner, this—no, *that* way, and across the street. It's a tall gray building, but it hasn't been there very long so watch you don't miss it. And you have to go down some stairs around the side. Now will you please follow my advice?”

Noss nods obediently.

“Good, you won't be sorry. Now go straight there. Don't stop for anyone or anything. And here, don't forget these,”

the shopkeeper reminds Noss, handing him a pair of masks that are not a match. “Good luck!”

Though there doesn't seem to be anyone or anything to stop for, Noss does stop once or twice and dead in his tracks, as if someone behind him has just called his name. Then he thoughtfully caresses his chin and smooth cheeks. He also touches other parts of his face, frantically, before proceeding toward the tall gray building. By the time he reaches the stairway at the side, he cannot keep his hands off himself. Finally Noss puts on one of the masks, this being the semblance that was sized so well for him. But somehow it no longer fits as it once did. It keeps slipping as he descends the stairs, which look worn down by countless footsteps, bowed in the middle by the tonnage of time. Yet Noss remembers the shopkeeper saying that this place had not been here very long.

The room at the bottom, which Noss now enters, looks very old and is very quiet. At this late stage of the festival it is crowded with occupants who do nothing but sit silently in the shadows, with a face here and there reflecting the dull light. These faces are horribly simple, falling far short of countenances exhibiting familiar articulations. But gradually they are assuming features, though not those they once had. And the developments in progress, if the ear listens closely, are not entirely silent. Perhaps this is how a garden might sound if it could be heard growing in the dead of night. But here, on this night, the only sound is the soft creaking of new faces breaking through old flesh. And they are sprouting very nicely. With a torpid solemnity, Noss now removes the mask he is wearing and tosses it away. It falls to the floor and lies there sardonically grinning, fixed in an ex-

pression that, in days to come, many will find strange and wonder at.

For the old festival has ended so that a greater festival may begin. And of the old time nothing will be said, because nothing will be known. But the masks of that departed era, forgotten in a world that has no tolerance for monotony, will find something to remember. And perhaps they will speak of those days as they loiter on the threshold of doors that do not open, or in the darkness at the summit of stairways leading nowhere.

The Greater Festival of Masks (1989 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

First published in *Songs Of A Dead Dreamer*, 1985

There are only a few houses in the in the district where Noss begins his excursions. Nonetheless, they are spaced in such a way that suggests some provision has been made to accommodate a greater number of them, like a garden from which certain growths have been removed or have yet to appear. It even seems to Noss that these hypothetical houses, the ones now absent, may at some point change places with those which can be seen, in order to enrich the lapses in the landscape and give the visible a rest within nullity. And of these houses now stretching high or spreading low there will remain nothing to be said, for they will have entered the empty spaces, which are merely blank faces waiting to gain features. Such are the declining days of the festival, when the old and the new, the real and the imaginary, truth and deception, all join in the masquerade.

But even at this stage of the festival some have yet to take a large enough interest in tradition to visit one of the shops of costumes and masks. Until recently Noss was among this group, for reasons neither he nor anyone else could clearly explain. Now, however, he is on his way to a shop where every shelf is crammed and flowing over, even at this late stage of the festival, with costumes and masks. In the course

of his little journey, Noss keeps watching as buildings become more numerous, enough to make a street, many narrow streets, a town. He also observes numerous indications of the festival season. These signs are sometimes subtle, sometimes blatant in nature. For instance, not a few doors have been kept ajar, even throughout the night, and dim lights are left burning in empty rooms. On the other hand, someone has ostentatiously scattered a bunch of filthy rags in a certain street, shredded rags that are easily disturbed by the wind and twist gaily about. But there are many other gestures of festive abandonment; a hat, all style mangled out of it, has been jammed into the space where a board is missing in a high fence, a poster stuck to a crumbling wall has been diagonally torn in half, leaving a scrap of face fluttering at its edges; and into strange pathways of caprice revelers will go, but to have *shorn* themselves in doorways, to have littered the shadows with such wiry clippings and tumbling fluff. Reliquiae of the hatless, the faceless, the tediously groomed. And Noss passes it all by with no more, if no less, than a glance.

His attention appears more sharply awakened as he approaches the center of the town, where the houses, the shops, the fences, the walls are more, much more… close. There seems barely enough space for a few stars to squeeze their bristling light between the roofs and towers above, and the outsized moon—not a familiar face in this neighbourhood—must suffice to be seen as a fuzzy anonymous glow mirrored in silvery windows. The streets are more tightly strung here, and a single one may have several names compressed into it from end to end. Some of the names may be credited less to deliberate planning, or even the quirks of

local history, than an apparent need for the superfluous, as if a street sloughed off its name every so often like an old skin, the extra ones insuring that it would not go completely nameless. Perhaps a similar need could explain why the buildings in this district exhibit so many pointless embellishments: doors which are elaborately decorated but will not budge in their frames; massive shutters covering blank walls behind them; enticing balconies, well-railed and promising in their views, but without any means of entrance, stairways that enter dark niches... and a dead end. These structural adornments are mysterious in an area so pressed for room that even shadows must be shared. And so must other things. Backyards, for example, where a few fires still burn, the last of the festival pyres. For in this part of town the season is still at its peak, or at least the signs of its termination have yet to appear. Perhaps revelers hereabouts are still nudging each other in corners, hinting at preposterous things, coughing in the middle of jokes. Here the festival is not dead. For the delirium of this rare celebration does not radiate out from the center of things, but seeps inward from remote margins. Thus, the festival may have begun in an isolated hovel at the edge of town, if not in some lonely residence in the woods beyond. In any case, its agitations have now reached the heart of this dim region, and Noss has finally resolved to visit one of the many shops of costumes and masks.

A steep stairway leads him to a shrunken platform of a porch, and a little slot of a door puts him inside the shop. And indeed the shelves *are* crammed and flowing over with costumes and masks. The shelves are very dark and mouth-like, stuffed into silence by the wardrobes and faces of

dreams. Noss pulls at a mask that is overhanging the edge of one shelf—a dozen fall down upon him. Backing away from the avalanche of false faces, he looks at the sardonically grinning one in his hand.

“Excellent choice,” says the shopkeeper, who steps out from behind a long counter in the rearguard of shadows. “Put it on and let's see. Yes, my gracious, this is excellent. You see how your entire face is well-covered, from the hairline to just beneath the chin and no farther. And at the sides it clings snugly. It doesn't pinch, am I right?” The mask nods in agreement. “Good, that's how it should be. Your ears are unobstructed—you have very nice ones, by the way—while the mask holds onto the sides of your head. It is comfortable, yet secure enough to stay put and not fall off in the heat of activity. You'll see, after a while you won't even know you are wearing it! The holes for the eyes, nostrils and mouth are perfectly placed for your features; no natural function is inhibited, that is a must. And it looks so good on you, especially up close, though I'm sure also at a distance. Go and stand over there in the moonlight. Yes, it was made for you, what do you say? I'm sorry, what?”

Noss walks back to the shopkeeper and removes the mask.

“I said alright, I suppose I'll take this one.”

“Fine, there's no question about it. Now let me show you some of the other ones, just a few steps this way.”

The shopkeeper pulls something down from a high shelf and places it in his customers’ hands. What Noss now holds is another mask, but one that seems somehow to be... impractical. While the first mask possessed every virtue of conformity with its wearer's face, this mask is neglectful of such

advantages. Its surface forms a strange mass of bulges and depressions which appear unaccommodating at best, possibly pain-inflicting. And it is so much heavier than the first one.

“No,” says Noss, handing back the mask, “I believe the other will do.”

The shopkeeper looks as if he is at a loss for words. He stares at Noss for many moments before saying: “May I ask you a personal question? Have you lived, how shall I say this, *here* all your life?”

The shopkeeper is now gesturing beyond the thick glass of the shop's windows. Noss shakes his head in reply.

“Well, then there's no rush. Don't make any hasty decisions. Stay around the shop and think it over, there's still time. In fact, it would be a favor to me. I have to go out for a while, you see, and if you could keep an eye on things I would greatly appreciate it. You'll do it then? Good. And don't worry,” he says, taking a large hat from a peg that poked out of the wall, “I'll be back in no time, no time at all. If someone pays us a visit, just do what you can for them,” he shouts before closing the front door behind him.

Now alone, Noss takes a closer look at those outlandish masks the shopkeeper had just shown him. While differing in design, as any good assortment of masks must, they all share the same impracticalities of weight and shape, as well as having some very oddly placed apertures for ventilation, and too many of them.

Outlandish indeed! Noss gives these masks back to the shelves from which they came, and he holds on tightly to the one the shopkeeper had said was so perfect for him, so practical in every way. After a vaguely exploratory shuffle around

the shop, Noss finds a stool behind the long counter and there falls asleep. It seems only a few moments later that he is awakened by some sound or other. Collecting his wits, he gazes around the dark shop, as if searching for the source of hidden voices which are calling to him. Then the sound returns, a soft thudding behind him and far off into the shadowy rooms at the rear of the shop. Hopping down from the stool, Noss passes through a narrow doorway, descends a brief flight of stairs, passes through another doorway, ascends another brief flight of stairs, walks down a short and very low hallway, and at last arrives at the back door. It rumbles again once or twice.

“Just do what you can for them,” Noss remembers. But he looks uneasy. On the other side of that door there is only a tiny plot of ground bordered by a high fence.

“Why don't you come around the front?” he shouts through the door. But there is no reply, only a request.

“Please bring five of those masks to the other side of the fence. That's where we are now. There's a fire, you'll see us. Well, can you do this or not?”

Noss leans his head into the shadows by the wall: one side of his face is now in darkness while the other is indistinct, blurred by a strange glare which is only an impostor of true light. “Give me a moment, I'll meet you there,” he finally replies. “Did you hear me?”

There was no response from the other side. Noss turns the door handle, which is unexpectedly warm, and through a thread-like crack peers out into the backyard. There is nothing to be seen except a square of blackness surrounded by the tall wooden slabs of the fence, and a few thin branches twisting against a pale sky. But whatever signs of

pranksterism Noss perceives or is able to fabricate to himself, there is no defying the traditions of the festival, even if one can claim to have merely adopted this town and its seasonal practices, however *rare* they may be. For innocence and excuses are not harmonious with the spirit of this fabulously infrequent occasion. Therefore, Noss retrieves the masks and brings them to the rear door of the shop. Cautiously, he steps out.

When he reaches the far end of the yard—a much greater distance from the shop than it had seemed—he sees a faint glow of fire through the cracks in the fence. There is a small door with clumsy black hinges and only a hole for a handle. Setting the five masks aside for a moment, Noss squats down and peers through the hole. On the other side of the fence is a dark yard exactly like the one on his side, save for the fire burning upon the ground. Gathered around the blaze are several figures—five, perhaps four—with hunched shoulders and spines curving toward the light of the flames. They are all wearing masks which at first seem securely fitted to their faces. But, one by one, these masks appear to loosen and slip down, as if each is losing hold upon its wearer. Finally, one of the figures pulls his off completely and tosses it into the fire, where it curls and shrinks into a wad of bubbling blackness. The others follow this action when their time comes. Relieved of their masks, the figures resume their shrugging stance. But the light of the fire now shines on four, yes four, smooth and faceless faces.

"These are the wrong ones, you little idiot," says someone who is standing in the shadows by the fence. And Noss can only stare dumbly as a hand snatches up the masks and

draws them into the darkness. “We have no more use for *these*!” the voice shouts.

Noss runs in retreat towards the shop, the five masks striking his narrow back and falling face-up on the ground. For he has gained a glimpse of the speaker in the shadows and now understands why *those* masks are no good to them now. Once inside the shop, Noss leans upon the long counter to catch his breath. Then he looks up and sees that the shopkeeper has returned.

“There were some masks that I brought out to the fence. They were the wrong ones,” he says to the shopkeeper.

“No trouble at all,” the other replies. “I'll see that the right ones are delivered. Don't worry, there's still time. And how about you, then?”

“Me?”

“And the masks, I mean.”

“Oh, I'm sorry to have bothered you in the first place. It's not at all what I thought… That is, maybe I should just—”

“Nonsense! You can't leave now, you see. Let me take care of everything. Listen to me, I want you to go to a place where they know how to handle cases like this. You're not the only one who is a little frightened tonight. It's right around the corner, this—no, *that* way, and across the street. It's a tall grey building, but it hasn't been there very long so watch you don't miss it. And you have to go down some stairs around the side. Now will you please follow my advice?”

Noss nods obediently.

“Good, you won't be sorry. Now go straight there. Don't stop for anyone or anything. And here, don't forget these,” the shopkeeper reminds Noss, handing him an unmatching pair of masks. “Good luck!”

Though there doesn't seem to be anyone or anything to stop for, Noss does stop once or twice and dead in his tracks, as if someone behind him had just called his name. Then he thoughtfully caresses his chin and smooth cheeks; he also touches other parts of his face, frantically, before proceeding to toward the tall grey building. By the time he reaches the stairway on the side of the building, he cannot keep his hands off himself. Finally, Noss puts on one of the masks—the sardonically grinning one. But somehow it no longer fits him the way it once did. It keeps slipping, little by little, as he descends the stairs, which look worn down by countless footsteps, bowed in the middle by the invisible tonnage of time. Yet Noss remembers the shopkeeper saying this place hadn't been here very long.

The room at the bottom, which Noss now enters, also looks very old and is very… quiet. At this late stage of the festival the room is crowded with occupants who do nothing but sit silently in the shadows, with a face here and there reflecting the dull light. These faces are horribly simple; they have no expression at all, or very slight expressions and ones that are strange. But they are finding their way back, little by little, to a familiar land of faces. And the process, if the ear listens closely, is not an entirely silent one. Perhaps this is how a garden would sound if it could be heard growing in the dead of night. It is that soft creaking of new faces breaking through old flesh. And they are growing very nicely. At length, and with a torpid solemnity, Noss removes the old mask and tosses it away. It falls to the floor and lies there grinning in the dim glow of that room, fixed in an expression that, in days to come, many will find strange and wonder at.

For the old festival of masks has ended, so that a greater festival may begin. And of the old time nothing will be said, because nothing will be known. But the old masks, false souls, will find something to remember, and perhaps they will speak of those days when they are alone behind doors that do not open, or in the darkness at the summit of stairways leading nowhere.

The Lost Art Of Twilight (2010 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

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I

I have painted it, tried to at least. Oiled it, watercolored it, smeared it upon a mirror which I positioned to rekindle the glow of the real thing. And always in the abstract. Never actual sinking suns in spring, autumn, winter skies; never a sepia light descending over the trite horizon of a lake, not even the particular lake I like to view from the great terrace of my massive old mansion. But these *Twilights* of mine were not done in the abstract merely for the sake of keeping out the riff-raff of the real world. Other painterly abstractionists may claim that nothing in life is represented by their canvases—that a streak of iodine red is just a streak of iodine red, a spattering of flat black equals a spattering of flat black. Yet sheer color, sheer rhythms of line and masses of structure, sheer composition in general meant more to me than that. The others have only *seen* their dramas of shape and shade; I—and it is impossible to insist on this too strenuously—I have *been* there. My twilight abstractions did in fact represent some reality: a zone composed of palaces of soft and sullen colors standing beside seas of scintillating pattern and beneath sadly radiant patches of sky, a zone where the observer is a formal presence, an impalpable essence, free of

carnal substance—a *denizen* of the abstract. But that is just a memory to me now. What I thought would last forever was lost in the blink of an eye.

Only a few weeks ago I was sitting out on the terrace, watching the early autumn sun droop into the above-mentioned lake, talking to Aunt T. Her heels clomped with a pleasing hollowness on drab flagstones. Silver-haired, she was attired in a gray suit, a big bow flopping up to her lower chins. In her left hand was a long envelope, neatly caesareaned, and in her right hand the letter it had contained, folded in sections like a triptych.

"They want to see you," she said, gesturing with the letter. "They want to come here."

"I don't believe it," I said, and skeptically turned in my chair to watch the sunlight stretching across the extensive lawn that fronts the old pile where it seemed we had lived for centuries.

"If you would only read the letter," she insisted.

"I can't. Not if it's written in French."

"Now that's not true, to judge by those books you're always stacking in the library."

"Those happen to be art books. I just look at the pictures."

"You like pictures, André?" she asked in her best matronly ironic tone. "I have a picture for you. Here it is: they *are* going to be allowed to come here and stay with us as long as they like. There's a family of them, two children and the letter also mentions an unmarried sister. They're coming from Aix-en-Provence to visit America, and while on their trip they want to see their only living blood relation here. Do

you understand this picture? They know who you are and, more to the point, where you are."

"I'm surprised they would want to, since they're the ones —"

"No, they're not. They're from your *father's* side of the family. The Duvals," she explained. "They do know all about you but say," Aunt T. here consulted the letter for a moment, "that they are *sans préjugé*."

"The generosity of such creatures freezes my blood. Twenty years ago these people do what they did to my mother, and now they have the gall, the *gall*, to say they aren't prejudiced against *me*."

Aunt T. gave me a warning hrumph to silence myself, for just then Rops appeared bearing a tray with a slender glass set upon it. I dubbed him Rops because he, as much as his artistic namesake, never failed to give me the charnel house creeps.

He cadavered across the terrace to serve Aunt T. her afternoon cocktail.

"Thank you," she said, taking the glass.

"Anything for you, sir?" he asked, now holding the tray over his chest like a silver shield.

"Ever see me have a drink, Rops?" I asked back. "Ever see me—"

"André, behave. That will be all, thank you."

Rops then lurched away in slow, bony steps.

"You can continue your rant now," said Aunt T. graciously.

"I'm through. You know how I feel," I replied and then looked away toward the lake, drinking in the dim mood of the twilight in the absence of normal refreshment.

“Yes, I do know how you feel, and you've always been wrong. You've always had these romantic ideas of how you and your mother, rest her soul, have been the victims of some monstrous injustice. But nothing is the way you like to think it is. They were not backward peasants who, we should say, *saved* your mother. They were wealthy, sophisticated members of her family. And they were not superstitious, because what they believed about your mother was the truth.”

“True or not,” I argued, “they believed the unbelievable—they acted on it—and that I call superstition. What reason could they possibly—”

“What *reason*? I have to say that at the time you were in no position to judge reasons, considering that we knew you only as a slight swelling inside your mother's body. I, on the other hand, was actually there. I saw the ‘new friends’ your mother had made, that ‘aristocracy of blood,’ as she called them, which I understood to signify her envy of their hereditary social status. But I don't judge her, I never have. After all, she had just lost her husband—your father was a good man and it's a shame you never knew him. And then to be carrying his child, the child of a dead man... She was frightened, confused, and she ran back to her family and her homeland. Who can blame her if she started acting irresponsibly. But it's a shame what happened, especially for your sake.”

“You are indeed a comfort, *Auntie*,” I said with now regrettable sarcasm.

“Well, you have my sympathy whether you want it or not. I think I've proven that over the years.”

“Indeed you have,” I agreed.

Aunt T. poured the last of her drink down her throat and a little drop she wasn't aware of dripped from the corner of her mouth, shining in the crepuscular radiance like a pearl.

"When your mother didn't come home one evening—I should say *morning*—everyone knew what had happened, but no one said anything. Contrary to your ideas about their superstitious nature, they actually could not bring themselves to believe the truth for some time."

"It was good of all of you to let me go on developing for a while, even as you were deciding how to best hunt my mother down."

"I will ignore that remark."

"I'm sure you will."

"We did not *hunt* her down, as you well know. That's another of your persecution fantasies. She came to us, now didn't she? Scratching at the windows in the night—"

"You can skip this part, I already—"

"—swelling full as the fullest moon. And that was strange, because you would actually have been considered a dangerously premature birth according to normal schedules. But when we followed your mother back to the mausoleum of the local church, where she lay during the daylight hours, she was carrying the full weight of her pregnancy. The priest was shocked to find what he had living, one might say, in his own backyard. It was actually he, and not so much any of your mother's family, who thought we should not allow you to be brought into the world. And it was his hand that released your mother from the life of her new friends. Immediately afterward, though, she began to deliver, right in the coffin in which she lay. The blood was terrible. If we did—"

"It's not necessary to—"

“—*hunt* down your mother, you should be thankful that I was among that party. I had to get you out of the country that very night, back to America. I—”

At that point she could see I was no longer paying attention to her, but was distracted by the pleasanter anecdotes of the setting sun. When she stopped talking and joined in the view, I said:

“Thank you, Aunt T., for that diverting story. I never tire of hearing it.”

“I'm sorry, André, but I wanted to remind you of the truth.”

“What can I say? I realize I owe you my life, such as it is.”

“That's not what I mean. I mean the truth of what your mother became and what you now are.”

“I am nothing. Completely harmless.”

“That's why we must let the Duvals come and stay with us. To show them that the world has nothing to fear from you. I believe they need to see for themselves what you are, or rather aren't.”

“You really think that's their mission?”

“I do. They could make quite a bit of trouble for us if we don't satisfy their curiosity.”

I rose from my chair as the shadows of the failing twilight deepened and stood next to Aunt T. against the stone balustrade of the terrace. Leaning toward her, I said:

“Then let them come.”

II

I am an offspring of the dead. I am descended from the deceased. I am the progeny of phantoms. My ancestors are the illustrious multitudes of the defunct, grand and innu-

merable. My lineage is longer than time. My name is written in embalming fluid in the book of death. A noble race is mine.

In the immediate family, the first to meet his maker was my own maker: he rests in the tomb of the unknown father. But while the man did manage to sire me, he breathed his last breath in this world before I drew my first. He was felled by a single stroke, his first and last. In those final moments, so I'm told, his erratic and subtle brainwaves made strange designs across the big green eye of an EEG monitor. The same doctor who told my mother that her husband was no longer among the living also informed her, on the very same day, that she was pregnant. Nor was this the only affecting coincidence in the lives of my parents. Both of them belonged to wealthy families from Aix-en-Provence in southern France. However, their first meeting took place not in the old country but in the new, at the American university they each happened to be attending. And so two neighbors crossed a cold ocean to come together in a mandatory science course. When they compared notes on their common backgrounds, they knew it was destiny at work. They fell in love with each other and with their new homeland. The couple later moved into a rich and prestigious suburb (which I will decline to mention by name or state, since I still reside there and, for reasons that will eventually become apparent, must do so discreetly). For years the couple lived in contentment, and then my immediate male forebear died just in time to miss out on fatherhood, thus becoming the appropriate parent for his son-to-be.

Offspring of the dead.

But surely, one might protest, I was born of a living mother; surely upon arrival in this world I turned and gazed into a pair of glossy maternal eyes. Not so, as I think is evident from my earlier conversation with dear Aunt T. Widowed and pregnant, my mother fled back to Aix, to the comfort of her family estate and secluded living. But more on this in a moment. Meanwhile I can no longer suppress the urge to say a few things about my ancestral hometown.

Aix-en-Provence, where I was born but never lived, has many personal, though necessarily secondhand, associations for me. However, it is not just a connection between Aix and my own life that maintains such a powerful grip on my imagination. Also intermixed with this melodrama are a few marvels exclusive to the history of that region. Separate centuries, indeed epochs, play host to these wondrous occurrences, and they likewise exist in entirely different realms of mood, worlds apart in implication. Nevertheless, from my perspective they are inseparable. The first item of "historical record" is the following: In the seventeenth century there occurred the spiritual possession by divers demons of the nuns belonging to the Ursuline convent at Aix-en-Provence. Excommunication was soon in coming for the blighted sisters, who had been seduced into assorted blasphemies by the likes of Grésil, Sonnillon, and Vérin. De Plancy's *Dictionnaire infernal* respectively characterizes these demons, in the words of an unknown translator, as "the one who glistens horribly like a rainbow of insects; the one who quivers in a horrible manner; and the one who moves with a particular creeping motion." For the curious, engravings have been made of these kinetically and chromatically weird beings, unfortunately static and in black and white. Can you believe

it? What people are these—so obtuse and profound—that they could devote themselves to such nonsense? Who can fathom the science of superstition? (For, as an evil poet once scribbled, superstition is the reservoir of all truths.) This, then, is one element of the Aix of my imagination. The other is simply the birth in 1839 of Aix's most prominent citizen: Cézanne. His figure haunts the landscape of my brain, wandering about the Provençal countryside in search of his pretty pictures.

Together these two select phenomena fuse in my psyche into a single image of Aix, one as simultaneously grotesque and exquisite as a pantheon of gargoyles amid the splendor of a medieval church.

Such was the land to which my mother re-emigrated some decades ago, this Notre Dame world of horror and beauty. It's no wonder that she was seduced into the society of those beautiful strangers, who promised her liberation from a world of mortality where anguish had taken over, making her ripe for self-exile. I understood from Aunt T. that it all began at a summer party on the estate grounds of Ambroise and Paulette Valraux. The Enchanted Wood, as this place was known to the *hautes classes* in the vicinity. On the evening of the party, the weather was perfectly temperate. Lanterns were hung high up in the lindens, guide-lights leading to a heard-about heaven. A band played.

It was a mixed crowd at the party. And in attendance were a few persons whom nobody seemed to know, exotic strangers whose elegance was their invitation. Aunt T. did not give much thought to them at the time, and her account is rather sketchy. One of them danced with my mother, having no trouble luring the widow out of social retirement. An-

other with labyrinthine eyes whispered to her by the trees. Alliances were formed that night, promises made. Afterward my mother began going out on her own to assignations after sundown. Then she stopped coming home. Térèse—a personal attendant whom my mother had brought back with her from America—was hurt and confused by the cold snubs she had lately received from her mistress. My mother's family was reticent about the meaning of her recent behavior. ("And in her condition, *mon Dieu!*") Nobody knew what measures to take. Then some of the servants reported seeing a pale, pregnant woman lurking outside the house after dark.

Finally a priest was taken into the family's confidence. He suggested a course of action which no one questioned, not even Térèse. They lay in wait for my mother, righteous soul-hunters. They followed her drifting form as it returned to the mausoleum when daybreak was imminent. They removed the great stone lid of the sarcophagus and found her inside. "*Diabolique*," one of them exclaimed. There was some question about how many times and in what places she should be impaled. In the end they pinned her heart with a single spike to the velvet bed on which she lay. But what to do about the child? What would it be like? A holy soldier of the living or a monster of the dead. (Neither, you fools!) Fortunately or unfortunately, I've never been sure which, Térèse was with them and rendered their speculations academic. Reaching into the bloody matrix, she helped me to be born.

I was now heir to the family fortune. Térèse took me back to America and made arrangements with a sympathetic and avaricious lawyer to become the trustee of my estate. This involved a little magic act with identities. It required that

Térèse, for reasons of her own which I've never questioned, be promoted from my mother's adjutant to her sister. And so my Aunt T. was christened, born in the same year as I.

Naturally all this leads to the story of my life, which has no more life in it than story. It's not for the cinema, it's not for novels. It wouldn't even fill out a single lyric of modest length. It might make a piece of modern music: a slow, throbbing drone like the lethargic pumping of a premature heart. Best of all, though, would be the depiction of my life story as an abstract painting—a twilight world, indistinct around the edges and without center or focus; a bridge without banks, tunnel without openings; a crepuscular existence pure and simple. No heaven or hell, only a quiet withdrawal from life's hysteria and death's tenacious darkness. (And I tell you this: What I most love about twilight is the deceptive sense, as one looks down the dimming west, not that it is some fleeting transitional moment, but that there's actually nothing before or after it: *that that's all there is*.) My life as it was never had a beginning, but this did not mean it would be without an end, given the unforeseen factors that at length came into play. Beginnings and endings aside, I will now pick up my narrative from where I left off.

So what was the answer to those questions hastily put by the monsters who stalked my mother? Was my nature to be souled humanness or soulless vampirism? To both of these conjectures about my existential standing my response was "No." I existed between two worlds and had little claim upon the assets or liabilities of either. Neither living nor dead, unalive or undead, not having anything to do with such tedious polarities, such tiresome opposites, which as a fact are no more different from each other than a pair of imbecilic

monozygotes. I said no to life and death. No, Mr. Springbud. No, Mr. Worm. Without ever saying hello or good-bye, I merely avoided their company, scorned their gaudy invitations.

Of course, in the beginning Aunt T. tried to care for me as if I were a normal child. (Incidentally, I can perfectly recall every moment of my life from birth, for my existence took the form of one seamless moment, without forgettable yesterdays or expectant tomorrows.) She tried to give me normal food, which I always regurgitated. Later she prepared for me a sort of purée of raw meat, which I ingested and digested, though it never became a habit. And I never asked her what was actually in that preparation, for Aunt T. wasn't afraid to use money, and I knew what money could buy in the way of unusual food for an unusual infant. I suppose I did become accustomed to similar nourishment while growing within my mother's womb, feeding on a potpourri of blood types contributed by the citizens of Aix. But my appetite was never very strong for physical food.

Stronger by far was my hunger for a kind of transcendental fare, a feasting of the mind and soul: the astral banquet of Art. There I fed. And I had quite a few master chefs to plan the menu. Though we lived in exile from the world, Aunt T. did not overlook my education. For purposes of appearance and legality, I have earned diplomas from some of the finest private schools in the world. (These, too, money can buy.) But my real education was even more private than that. Tutorial geniuses were well paid to visit our home, only too glad to teach an invalid child of nonetheless decided promise.

Through personal instruction I scanned the arts and sciences. Yes, I learned to quote my French poets,

Gaunt immortality in black and gold,
Wreathed consoler hideous to behold.
The beautiful lie of a mother's womb,
The pious trick—for it is the tomb!

but mostly in translation, for something kept me from ever attaining more than a beginner's facility in that foreign tongue. I did master, however, the complete grammar of the French *eye*. I could read the inner world of Redon, who was almost born an American, and his *grand isolé* paradise of black. I could effortlessly comprehend the outer world of Renoir and his associates of the era, who spoke in the language of light. And I could decipher the impossible worlds of the Surrealists—those twisted arcades where brilliant shadows are sewn to the rotting flesh of rainbows.

Among my educators, I remember in particular a man by the name of Raymond, who taught me the rudimentary skills of the artist in oils. Once I showed him a study I had done of that sacred phenomenon I witnessed each sundown. I can still see the look in his eyes, as if they beheld the rising of a curtain upon some terribly involved outrage. He abstractedly adjusted his wire-rim spectacles, wobbling them around on the bridge of his nose. His gaze shifted from the canvas to me and back again. His only comment was: “The shapes, the colors are not supposed to lose themselves that way. Something... no, impossible.” Then he asked to be permitted use of the bathroom facilities. At first I thought this gesture was meant as a symbolic appraisal of my work. But he was quite in earnest, so all I could do was to provide dir-

ections to the nearest chamber of convenience. He walked out of the room and never came back.

Such is a thumbnail sketch of my half-toned existence: twilight after twilight after twilight. And in all that blur of time I never imagined that I would have to account for myself as one who existed beyond or between the clashing worlds of human fathers and enchanted mothers. But now I had to consider how I would explain, that is *conceal*, my unnatural mode of being from my visiting relatives. Despite the hostility I showed toward them in front of Aunt T., I actually desired that they should take a good report of me back to the real world, if only to keep it away from my own world in the future. For days prior to their arrival, I came to think of myself as a figure of invalidism living in studious isolation, a sallow-complected Schoolman laboring at recondite studies in his musty sanctum, an artist consecrated to vacuity. I anticipated they would soon have the proper image of me as all impotence and no impetus. And that would be that.

But never did I anticipate being called upon to face the almost forgotten fact of my vampiric origins—the taint beneath the paint of the family portrait.

III

The Duval family, and unmarried sister, were arriving on a night flight which we would meet at the airport. Aunt T. thought this would suit me fine, considering my tendency to sleep most of the day and arise with the setting sun. But at the last minute I suffered a seizure of stage fright. “The *crowds*,” I appealed to Aunt T. She knew that crowds were the world's most powerful talisman against me, as if it had needed any at all. She understood that I would not be able to

serve on the welcoming committee, and Rops' younger brother Gerald, a good seventy-five if he was a day, drove her to the airport alone. Yes, I promised Aunt T., I would be sociable and come out to meet everyone as soon as I saw the lights of the big black car floating up our private drive.

But I wasn't and I didn't. I took to my room and drowsed before a television with the sound turned off. As the colors danced in the dark, I submitted more and more to an anti-social sleepiness. Finally I instructed Rops, by way of the estate-wide intercom, to inform Aunt T. and company that I wasn't feeling very well and needed to rest. This, I figured, would be in keeping with the façade of a harmless valetudinarian, and a perfectly normal one at that. A night-sleeper. Very good, I could hear them saying to their souls. And then, I swear, I actually turned off the television and slept real sleep in real darkness.

Yet things became less real at some point deep into the night. I must have left the intercom open, for I heard little metallic voices emanating from that little metallic square on my bedroom wall. In my state of quasi-somnolence it never occurred to me that I could simply get out of bed and make the voices go away by switching off that terrible box. And terrible it indeed seemed. The voices spoke a foreign language, but it wasn't French, as one might have suspected. It was something more foreign than that. Perhaps a cross between a madman talking in his sleep and the sonar screech of a bat. I heard the voices cluttering and chattering with each other until I fell soundly asleep once more. And their dialogue had ended before I awoke, for the first time in my life, to the bright eyes of morning.

The house was quiet. Even the servants seemed to have duties that kept them soundless and invisible. I took advantage of my wakefulness at that early hour and prowled unnoticed about the old place, figuring everyone else was still in bed. The four rooms Aunt T. had set aside for our guests all had their big paneled doors closed: a room for the mama and papa, two others close by for the kids, and a chilly chamber at the end of the hall for the maiden sister. I paused a moment outside each room and listened for the revealing songs of slumber, hoping to know my relations better by their snores and whistles and monosyllables grunted between breaths. But they made none of the usual racket. They hardly made any sounds at all, though they echoed one another in making a certain noise that seemed to issue from the same cavity. It was a kind of weird wheeze, a panting from the back of the throat, the hacking of a tubercular demon. Having had an earful of strange cacophonies the night before, I soon abandoned my eavesdropping without regret.

I spent the day in the library, whose high windows I noticed were designed to allow a maximum of natural reading light. However, I drew the curtains on them and kept to the shadows, finding morning sunshine not everything it was said to be. But it was difficult to get much reading done. Any moment I expected to hear foreign footsteps descending the double-winged staircase, crossing the black and white marble chessboard of the front hall, taking over the house. Despite these expectations, and to my increasing sense of unease, the family never appeared.

Twilight came and still no mama and papa, no sleepy-eyed son or daughter, no demure sister remarking with astonishment at the inordinate length of her beauty sleep. And

no Aunt T., either. They must've had quite a time the night before, I thought. But I didn't mind being alone with the twilight. I drew back the curtains on the three west windows, each of them a canvas depicting the same scene in the sky. My private *Salon d'automne*.

It was a rare sunset. Having sat behind opaque drapery all day, I had not realized that a storm was pushing in and that much of the sky was the precise shade of old suits of armor one finds in museums. At the same time, patches of brilliance engaged in a territorial dispute with the oncoming onyx of the storm. Light and darkness mingled in strange ways both above and below. Shadows and sunshine washed together, streaking the scene with an unearthly study of glare and gloom. Bright clouds and black folded into each other in a no-man's land of the sky. The autumn trees took on the appearance of sculptures formed in a dream, their leaden-colored trunks and branches and iron-red leaves all locked in an infinite moment, unnaturally timeless. The gray lake slowly tossed and tumbled in a dead sleep, nudging unconsciously against its breakwall of numb stone. A vista of contradiction and ambivalence, a tragicomical haze over all. A land of perfect twilight.

I was jubilant: finally the twilight had come down to earth, and to me. I had to go out into this incomparable atmosphere, I had no choice. I left the house and walked to the lake, where I stood on the slope of stiff grass which led down to it. I gazed up through the trees at the opposing tones of the sky. I kept my hands in my pockets and touched nothing, except with my eyes.

Not until an hour or more had elapsed did I think of returning home. It was dark by then, though I don't recall the

passing of the twilight into evening, for twilight suffers no flamboyant finales. There were no stars visible, the storm clouds having moved in and wrapped up the sky. They began sending out tentative drops of rain. Thunder mumbled above and I was forced back to the house, cheated once again by the night.

In the front hall I called out names in the form of questions. Aunt T.? Rops? Gerald? M. Duval? Madame? Everything was silence. Where was everyone? I wondered. They couldn't still be asleep. I passed from room to room and found no signs of occupation. A day of dust was upon all surfaces. Where were the domestics? At last I opened the double doors to the dining room. Was I late for the supper Aunt T. had planned to honor our visiting family?

It appeared so. But if Aunt T. sometimes had me consume the forbidden fruit of flesh and blood, it was never directly from the branches, never the sap taken warm from the tree of life itself. Yet here were spread the remains of just such a feast. It was the ravaged body of Aunt T., though they'd barely left enough on her bones for identification. The thick white linen was clotted like an unwrapped bandage. “Rops!” I shouted. “Gerald, somebody!” But I knew the servants were no longer in the house, that I was alone.

Not quite alone, of course. This soon became apparent to my twilight brain as it dipped its way into total darkness. I was in the company of five black shapes which stuck to the walls and soon began flowing along their surface. One of them detached itself and moved toward me, a weightless mass which felt icy when I tried to sweep it away and put my hand right through the thing. Another followed, unhinging itself from a doorway where it hung down. A third left a

blanched scar upon the wallpaper where it clung like a slug, pushing itself off to join the attack. Then came the others descending from the ceiling, dropping onto me as I stumbled in circles and flailed my arms. I ran from the room but the things had me closely surrounded. They guided my flight, heading me down hallways and up staircases. Finally they cornered me in a small room, a stuffy little place I had not been in for years. Colored animals frolicked upon the walls, blue bears and yellow rabbits. Miniature furniture was covered with graying sheets. I hid beneath a tiny elevated crib with ivory bars. But they found me and closed in.

They were not driven by hunger, for they had already feasted. They were not frenzied with a murderer's bloodlust, for they were cautious and methodical. This was simply a family reunion, a sentimental gathering. Now I understood how the Duvals could afford to be *sans préjugé*. They were worse than I, who was only a half-breed, a hybrid, a mere mulatto of the soul: neither a blood-warm human nor a blood-drawing devil. But they—who came from an Aix on the map—were the purebreds of the family.

And they drained my body dry.

IV

When I regained awareness once more, it was still dark and there was a great deal of dust in my throat. Not actually dust, of course, but a strange dryness I had never before experienced. And there was another new experience: hunger. I felt as if there were a bottomless chasm within me, a great void which needed to be filled—flooded with oceans of blood. I was one of them now, reborn into the ravenous life of the undead. Everything I shunned in my ambition to cir-

cumvent a birth-and-death existence I had become—just another beast with a hundred stirring hungers. Sallow and voracious, I had joined the society of the living dead, a contemptible participant in the worst of two worlds. André of the graveyards—a *sociable corpse*.

The five of them had each drunk from my body by way of five separate fountains. But the wounds had nearly sealed by the time I awoke in the blackness, owing to the miraculous healing capabilities of the dead. The upper floors were all in shadow now, and I made my way toward the light coming from downstairs. A hanging lamp in the hall below illuminated the carved banister at the top of the stairway, where I emerged from the darkness of the second floor, and this sight inspired in me a terrible ache of emotion I'd never known before: a feeling of loss, though of nothing I could specifically name, as if somehow the deprivation lay in my future.

As I descended the stairs I saw that they were already waiting to meet me, standing silently upon the black and white squares of the front hall. Papa the king, mama the queen, the boy a knight, the girl a dark little pawn, and a bitchy maiden bishop standing behind. And now they had my house, my castle, to complete the pieces on their side. On mine there was nothing.

"Devils," I screamed, leaning hard upon the staircase rail. "Devils," I repeated. But they appeared horribly unperturbed by my outburst. "*Diables*," I reiterated in their own loathsome tongue.

But neither was French their true language, as I found out when they began speaking among themselves. I covered my ears, trying to smother their voices. They had a language

all their own, a style of speech well-suited to dead vocal organs. The words were breathless, shapeless rattlings in the back of their throats, parched scrapings at a mausoleum portal. Arid gasps and dry gurgles were their dialects. These grating intonations were especially disturbing as they emanated from the mouths of things that had at least the form of human beings. But worst of all was my realization that I understood perfectly well what they were saying.

The boy stepped forward, pointing at me while looking back and speaking to his father. It was the opinion of this wine-eyed and rose-lipped youth that I should have suffered the same end as Aunt T. With an authoritative impatience the father told the boy that I was to serve as a sort of tour guide through this strange new land, a native who could keep them out of such difficulties as foreign visitors sometimes encounter. Besides, he concluded, *I was one of the family*. The boy was incensed and coughed out an incredibly foul characterization of his father. Exactly what he said could only be conveyed by that queer hacking patois, which suggested feelings and relationships of a nature incomprehensible outside of the world it mirrored with disgusting perfection. It was a discourse in hell on the subject of sin.

An argument ensued, and the father's composure turned to an infernal rage. He finally subdued his son with bizarre threats that have no counterparts in the language of ordinary malevolence. After the boy was silenced he turned to his aunt, seemingly for comfort. This woman of chalky cheeks and sunken eyes touched the boy's shoulder and easily drew him toward her with a single finger, guiding his body as if it were a balloon, weightless and toy-like. They spoke in sullen

whispers, using a personal form of address that hinted at a longstanding and unthinkable allegiance between them.

Apparently aroused by this scene, the daughter now stepped forward and used this same mode of address as though bidding for my recognition. Her mother abruptly gagged out a single syllable at her. What she called the child might possibly be imagined, but only with reference to the most feral degenerates of the human world. Their own form of expression carried the dissonant overtones of another world altogether. Each utterance was an opera of iniquity, a chorus of savage anathemas, a psalm hissing of fetid lust.

"I will not become one of you," I *thought* I screamed at them. But the sound of my voice was already so much like theirs that the words had exactly the opposite meaning I intended. The family suddenly ceased bickering among themselves. My flare-up had consolidated them. Each mouth, cluttered with uneven teeth like a village cemetery overcrowded with battered gravestones, opened and smiled. The look on their faces told me something about my own. They could see my growing hunger, see deep down into the dusty catacomb of my throat which cried out to be anointed with bloody nourishment. They knew my weakness.

Yes, they could stay in my house. (*Famished.*)

Yes, I could make arrangements to cover up the disappearance of Aunt T. and the servants, for I am a wealthy man and know what money can buy. (*Please, my family, I'm famished.*)

Yes, they would receive sanctuary in my home for as long as they liked, which would likely be very long. (*Please, I'm famishing down to the depths of me.*)

Yes, yes, yes. I agreed to everything. It would all be taken care of. *(To the depths!)*

But first I begged them, for heaven's sake, to let me go out into the night.

Night, night, night, night. Night, night, night.

—

Now twilight is an alarm that rouses me to feast. And the precious import it held all through my bygone half-life is nearly gone, while the prospect of eternal life in eternal death seduces me more and more. Nevertheless, there is something in my heart that wishes them well who would put an end to my precarious immortality. I am not yet so estranged from what I was to deny them my undoing. My exsanguinations thus far are only a need, not a passion. But I know that will change. I was once the scion of an old family from an old country, but now I have new blood in my veins and mine is a country outside of time. I have been resurrected from a condition of lassitude into one of fierce survival. No longer can I retreat into a world of deliquescent sunsets, for I must go out as summoned by a craving to draw fresh blood from the night.

Night—after night—after night.

The Lost Art Of Twilight (1989 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

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I have painted it, tried to at least. Oiled it, watercolored it, smeared it upon a mirror which I positioned to rekindle the glow of the real thing. And always in the abstract. Never actual sinking suns in spring, autumn, winter skies; never a sepia light descending over the trite horizon of a lake, not even the particular lake I like to view from the great terrace of my great house. But these *Twilights* of mine were not merely all abstraction, which is simply a way to keep out the riff-raff of the real world. Other painterly abstractionists may claim that nothing is represented in their canvases, and probably nothing is: a streak of iodine red is just a streak of iodine red, a patch of flat black equals a patch of flat black. But pure color, pure light, pure lines and their rhythms, pure form in general all mean much more than that. The others have only *seen* their dramas of shape and shade; I—and it is impossible to insist on this too strenuously—I have *been* there. And my twilight abstractions did in fact represent some reality, somewhere, sometime: a zone formed by palaces of soft and sullen color hovering beside seas of scintillating pattern and beneath rhythmic skies; a zone in which the visitor himself is transformed into a formal essence, a luminous presence, free of substance—a citizen of

the abstract. And a zone (I cannot sufficiently amplify my despair on this point, so I will not try) that I will never know again.

Only a few weeks ago I was sitting out on the terrace of my massive old mansion, watching the early autumn sun droop into the above-mentioned lake, talking to Aunt T. Her heels clomped with a pleasing hollowness on the flagstones of the terrace. Silver-haired, she was attired in a gray suit, a big bow flopping up to her lower chins. In her left hand was a long envelope, neatly caesarianed, and in her right hand the letter it had contained, folded in sections like a triptych.

"They want to see you," she said, gesturing with the letter. "They want to come here."

"I don't believe it," I said and skeptically turned in my chair to watch the sunlight stretching in long cathedral-like aisles across the upper and lower levels of the lawn.

"If you would only read the letter," she insisted.

"It's in French, no? Can't read."

"Now that's not true, to judge by those books you're always stacking in the library."

"Those happen to be art books. I just look at the pictures."

"You like pictures, André?" she asked in her best matronly ironic tone. "I have a picture for you. Here it is: they *are* going to be allowed to come here and stay with us as long as they like. There's a family of them, two children and the letter also mentions an unmarried sister. They're traveling all the way from Aix-en-Provence to visit America, and while on their trip they want to see their only living blood relation here. Do you understand this picture? They know who you are and, more to the point, where you are."

“I'm surprised they would want to, since they're the ones —”

“No, they're not. They're from your *father's* side of the family. The Duvals,” she explained. “They do know all about you but say [Aunt T. here consulted the letter for a moment] that they are *sans préjugé*.”

“The generosity of such creatures freezes my blood. Phenomenal scum. Twenty years ago these people do what they did to my mother, and now they have the gall, the *gall*, to say they aren't prejudiced against *me*.”

Aunt T. gave me a warning hrumph to silence myself, for just then the one I called Rops walked out onto the terrace bearing a tray with a slender glass set upon it. I dubbed him Rops because he, as much as his artistic namesake, never failed to give me the charnel house creeps.

He cadavered over to Aunt T. and served her her afternoon cocktail.

“Thank you,” she said, taking the glass of cloudy stuff.

“Anything for you, sir?” he asked, now holding the tray over his chest like a silver shield.

“Ever see me have a drink, Rops,” I asked back. “Ever see me—”

“André, behave. That'll be all, thank you.”

Rops left our sight in a few bony strides. “You can continue your rant now,” said Aunt T. graciously.

“I'm through. You know how I feel,” I replied and then looked away toward the lake, drinking in the dim mood of the twilight in the absence of normal refreshment.

“Yes, I do know how you feel, and you've always been wrong. You've always had these romantic ideas of how you and your mother, rest her soul, have been the victims of

some monstrous injustice. But nothing is the way you like to think it is. They were not backward peasants who, we should say, saved your mother. They were wealthy, sophisticated members of her own family. And they were not superstitious, because what they believed about your mother was the truth."

"True or not," I argued, "they believed the unbelievable—they acted on it—and that I call superstition. What reason could they possibly—"

"What *reason*? I have to say that at the time you were in no position to judge reasons, considering that we knew you only as a slight swelling inside your mother's body. But I was actually there. I saw the 'new friends' she had made, that 'aristocracy of blood,' as she called it, in contrast to her own people's hard-earned wealth. But I don't judge her, I never have. After all, she had just lost her husband—your father was a good man and it's a shame you never knew him—and then to be carrying his child, the child of a dead man… She was frightened, confused, and she ran back to her family and her homeland. Who can blame her if she started acting irresponsibly? But it's a shame what happened, especially for your sake."

"You are indeed a comfort… *Auntie*," I said with now regrettable sarcasm.

"Well, you have my sympathy whether you want it or not. I think I've proven that over the years."

"Indeed you have," I agreed, and somewhat sincerely.

Aunt T. poured the last of her drink down her throat and a little drop she wasn't aware of dripped from the corner of her mouth, shining in the crepuscular radiance like a pearl.

“When your mother didn't come home one evening—I should say *morning*—everyone knew what had happened, but no one said anything. Contrary to your ideas about their superstitiousness, they actually could not bring themselves to believe the truth for some time.”

“It was good of all of you to let me go on developing for a while, even as you were deciding how to best hunt my mother down.”

“I will ignore that remark.”

“I'm sure you will.”

“We did not *hunt* her down, as you well know. That's another of your persecution fantasies. She came to us, now didn't she? Scratching at the windows in the night—”

“You can skip this part, I already—”

“—swelling full as the fullest moon. And that was strange, because you would actually have been considered a dangerously premature birth according to normal schedules; but when we followed your mother back to the mausoleum of the local church, where she lay during the daylight hours, she was carrying the full weight of her pregnancy. The priest was shocked to find what he had living, so to speak, in his own backyard. It was actually he, and not so much any of your mother's family, who thought we should not allow you to be brought into the world. And it was his hand that ultimately released your mother from the life of her new friends, and immediately afterward she began to deliver, right in the coffin in which she lay. The blood was terrible. If we did—”

“It's not necessary to—”

“—*hunt* down your mother, you should be thankful that I was among that party. I had to get you out of the country

that very night, back to America. I—”

At that point she could see that I was no longer listening, was gazing with a distracted intensity on the pleasanter anecdotes of the setting sun. When she stopped talking and joined in the view, I said:

“Thank you, Aunt T., for that little bedtime story. I never tire of hearing it.”

“I'm sorry, André, but I wanted to remind you of the truth.”

“What can I say? I realize I owe you my life, such as it is.”

“That's not what I mean. I mean the truth of what your mother became and what you now are.”

“I am nothing. Completely harmless.”

“That's why we must let the Duvals come and stay with us. To show them the world has nothing to fear from you, because that's what I believe they're actually coming to see. That's the message they'll carry back to your family in France.”

“You really think that's why they're coming.”

“I do. They could make quite a bit of trouble for you, for us.”

I rose from my chair as the shadows of the failing twilight deepened. I went and stood next to Aunt T. against the stone balustrade of the terrace, and whispered:

“Then let them come.”

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I am an offspring of the dead. I am descended from the deceased. I am the progeny of phantoms. My ancestors are the illustrious multitudes of the defunct, grand and innumerable. My lineage is longer than time. My name is written

with embalming fluid in the book of death. A noble name is mine.

In the immediate family, the first to meet his maker was my own maker: he rests in the tomb of the unknown father. But while the man did manage to sire me, he breathed his last breath in this world before I drew my first. He was felled by a single stroke, his first and last. In those final moments, so I'm told, his erratic and subtle brainwaves made strange designs across the big green eye of an EEG monitor. The same doctor who told my mother that her husband was no longer among the living also informed her, on the very same day, that she was pregnant. Nor was this the only poignant coincidence in the lives of my parents. Both of them belonged to wealthy families from Aix-en-Provence in southern France. However, their first meeting took place not in the old country but in the new, at the American university they each happened to be attending. And so two neighbors crossed a cold ocean to come together in a mandatory science course. When they compared notes on their common backgrounds, they knew it was destiny at work. They fell in love with each other and with their new homeland. The couple later moved into a rich and prestigious suburb (which I will decline to mention by name or state, since I still reside there and, for reasons that will eventually become apparent, must do so discreetly). For years the couple lived in contentment, and then my immediate male forbear died just in time for fatherhood, becoming the appropriate parent for his son-to-be.

Offspring of the dead.

But surely, one might protest, I was born of a living mother; surely upon arrival in this world I turned and gazed

into a pair of glossy maternal eyes. Not so, as I think is evident from my earlier conversation with dear Aunt T. Widowed and pregnant, my mother had fled back to Aix, to the comfort of family estates and secluded living. But more on this in a moment. Meanwhile I can no longer suppress the urge to say a few things about my ancestral hometown.

Aix-en-Provence, where I was born but never lived, has many personal, though necessarily second-hand, associations for me. However, it is not just a connection between Aix and my own life that maintains such a powerful grip on my imagination and memory, a lifelong fascination which actually has more to do with a few unrelated facts in the history of the region. Two pieces of historical data, to be exact. Separate centuries, indeed epochs, play host to these data, and they likewise exist in entirely different realms of mood, worlds apart in implication. Nevertheless, from a certain point of view they can impress one as inseparable opposites. The first datum is as follows: In the seventeenth century there occurred the spiritual possession by divers demons of the nuns belonging to the Ursuline convent at Aix. And excommunication was soon in coming for the tragic sisters, who had been seduced into assorted blasphemies by the likes of Grésil, Sonnillon, and Vérin. De Plancy's *Dictionnaire infernal* respectively characterizes these demons, in the words of an unknown translator, as "the one who glistens horribly like a rainbow of insects; the one who quivers in a horrible manner; and the one who moves with a particular creeping motion." There also exist engravings of these kinetically and chromatically weird beings, unfortunately static and in black and white. Can you believe it? What people are these—so stupid and profound—that they could devote themselves

to such nonsense? Who can fathom the science of superstition? (For, as an evil poet once scribbled, superstition is the reservoir of all truths.) This, then, is one side of my imaginary Aix. The other side, and the second historical datum I offer, is simply the birth in 1839 of Aix's most prominent citizen: Cézanne. His figure haunts the Aix of my brain, wandering about the beautiful countryside in search of his pretty pictures.

Together these aspects fuse into a single image, as grotesque and coherent as a pantheon of gargoyles amid the splendor of a medieval church.

Such was the world to which my mother re-emigrated some decades ago, this Notre Dame world of horror and beauty. It's no wonder that she was seduced into the society of those beautiful strangers, who promised her an escape from the world of mortality where shock and suffering had taken over, driving her into exile. I understood from Aunt T. that it all began at a summer party on the estate grounds of Ambroise and Paulette Valraux. The Enchanted Wood, as this place was known to the *haut monde* in the vicinity. The evening of the party was as perfectly temperate as the atmosphere of dreams, which one never notices to be either sultry or frigid. Lanterns were hung high up in the lindens, guide-lights leading to a heard-about heaven. A band played.

It was a mixed crowd at the party. And as usual there were present a few persons whom nobody seemed to know, exotic strangers whose elegance was their invitation. Aunt T. did not pay much attention to them at the time, and her account is rather sketchy. One of them danced with my mother, having no trouble coaxing the widow out of social retirement. Another with labyrinthine eyes whispered to her

by the trees. Alliances were formed that night, promises made. Afterward my mother began going out on her own to rendezvous after sundown. Then she stopped coming home. Thérèse—nurse, confidante, and personal maid whom my mother had brought back with her from America—was hurt and confused by the cold snubs she had lately received from her mistress. My mother's family was elaborately reticent about the meaning of her recent behavior. (“And in her condition, *mon Dieu*!”) Nobody knew what measures to take. Then some of the servants reported seeing a pale, pregnant woman lurking outside the house after dark.

Finally a priest was taken into the family's confidence. He suggested a course of action which no one questioned, not even Thérèse. They lay in wait for my mother, righteous soul-hunters. They followed her drifting form as it returned to the mausoleum when daybreak was imminent. They removed the great stone lid of the sarcophagus and found her inside. “*Diabolique*,” someone exclaimed. There was some question about how many times and in what places she should be impaled. In the end they pinned her heart with a single spike to the velvet bed on which she lay. But what to do about the child? What would it be like? A holy soldier of the living or a monster of the dead? (Neither, you fools!) Fortunately or unfortunately, I've never been sure which, Thérèse was with them and rendered their speculations academic. Reaching into the bloodied matrix, she helped me to be born. I was now heir to the family fortune, and Thérèse took me back to America. She was extremely resourceful in this regard, arranging with a sympathetic and avaricious lawyer to become the trustee of my estate. This required a little magic act with identities. It required that Thérèse, for

reasons of her own which I've never questioned, be promoted from my mother's maid to her posthumous sister. And so my Aunt T. was christened, born in the same year as I.

Naturally all this leads to the story of my life, which has no more life in it than story. It's not for the cinema, it is not for novels; it wouldn't even fill out a single lyric of modest length. It might make a piece of modern music: a slow, throbbing drone like the lethargic pumping of a premature heart. Best of all, though, would be the depiction of my life story as an abstract painting: a twilight world, indistinct around the edges and without center or focus; a bridge without banks, tunnels without openings; a crepuscular existence pure and simple. No heaven or Hell, only a quiet haven between life's hysteria and death's tenacious darkness. (And you know, what I most loved about Twilight is the sense, as one looks down the dimming west, not that it is some fleeting transitional moment, but that there's actually nothing before or after it: *that that's all there is*.) My life never had a beginning, so naturally I thought it would never end. Naturally, I was wrong.

Well, and what was the answer to those questions hastily put by the monsters who stalked my mother? Was my nature to be souled humanness or soulless vampirism? The answer: neither. I existed between two worlds and had little claim upon the assets or liabilities of either. Neither living nor dead, unalive or undead, not having anything crucial to do with such tedious polarities, such tiresome opposites, which ultimately are no more different from each other than a pair of imbecilic monozygotes. I said no to life and death. No, Mr. Springbud. No, Mr. Worm. Without ever saying hello or

goodbye, I merely avoided their company, scorned their gaudy invitations.

Of course, in the beginning Aunt T. tried to care for me as if I were a normal child. (Incidentally, I can perfectly recall every moment of my life from birth, for my existence took the form of one seamless moment, without forgettable yesterdays or expectant tomorrows.) She tried to give me normal food, which I always regurgitated. Later Aunt T. prepared for me a sort of puréed meat, which I ingested and digested, though it never became a habit. And I never asked her what was actually in that preparation, for Aunt T. wasn't afraid to use money, and I knew what money could buy in the way of unusual food for an unusual infant. I suppose I did become accustomed to similar nourishment while growing within my mother's womb, feeding on a potpourri of blood types contributed by the citizens of Aix. But my appetite was never very strong for physical food.

Stronger by far was my hunger for a kind of transcendental fare, a feasting of the mind and soul: the astral banquet of Art. There I fed. And I had quite a few master chefs to plan the menu. Though we lived in exile from the world, Aunt T. did not overlook my education. For purposes of appearance and legality, I have earned diplomas from some of the finest private schools in the world. (These, too, money can buy.) But my real education was even more private than that. Tutorial geniuses were well paid to visit our home, only too glad to teach an invalid child of nonetheless exceptional promise.

Through personal instruction I scanned the arts and sciences. Yes, I learned to quote my French poets,

Lean immortality, all crêpe and gold,
Laurelled consoler frightening to behold,
Death is a womb, a mother's breast, you feign—
The fine illusion, oh the pious trick!

but mostly in translation, for something kept me from ever attaining more than a beginner's facility in that foreign tongue. I did master, however, the complete grammar, every dialect and idiom of the French *eye*. I could read the inner world of Redon (who was almost born an American)—his *grand isolé* paradise of black. I could effortlessly comprehend the outer world of Manet and the Impressionists—that secret language of light. And I could decipher the impossible worlds of the surrealists—those twisted arcades where brilliant shadows are sewn to the rotting flesh of rainbows.

I remember in particular a man by the name of Raymond, who taught me the rudimentary skills of the artist in oils. I recollect vividly showing him a study I had done of that sacred phenomenon I witnessed each sundown. Most of all I recall the look of his eyes, as if they beheld the rising of a curtain upon some terribly involved outrage. He abstractedly adjusted his delicate spectacles, wobbling them around on the bridge of his nose. His gaze shifted from the canvas to my face and back again. I'm not sure whether my face helped him understand something in the picture or vice versa. His only comment was: “The shapes, the colors are not supposed to lose themselves that way. Something... No, too much—” Then he asked to be permitted use of the bathroom facilities. At first I thought this gesture was means as a symbolic appraisal of my work. But he was quite in earnest and all I could do was give him directions to the nearest chamber of

convenience in a voice of equal seriousness. He walked out of the room with the first two fingers of his right hand pressing upon the pulsing wrist of his left. And he never came back.

Such is a thumbnail sketch of my half-toned existence: twilight after twilight after twilight. And in all that blur of time I but occasionally, and then briefly, wondered if I too possessed the same potential for immortality as my undead mother before her life was aborted and I was born. It is not a question that really bothers one who exists beyond, below, above, between—triumphantly *outside*—the clashing worlds of human fathers and enchanted mothers.

I did wonder, though, how I would explain, that is *conceal*, my unnatural mode of being from those people arriving from France. Despite the hostility I showed toward them in front of Aunt T., I actually desired that they should take a good report of me back to the real world, if only to keep it away from my own world in the future. For days previous to their arrival, I came to think of myself as a certain stock character in Gothic stories: the stranger in a strange castle of a house, that shadowy figure whom the hero travels over long distances to encounter, a dark soul hiding his horrors. In short, a medieval geek perpetrating strange deeds in secret sanctums. I expected they would soon have the proper image of me as all impotence and no impetus. And that would be that.

But never did I anticipate being called upon to face the almost forgotten realities of vampirism—the taint beneath the paint of the family portrait.

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The Duval family, and unmarried sister, were arriving on a night flight, which we would meet at the local international airport. Aunt T. thought this would suit me fine, considering my tendency to sleep most of the day away and arise with the setting sun. But at the last minute I suffered an acute seizure of stage fright. "The *crowds*," I appealed to Aunt T. She knew that crowds were the world's most powerful talisman against me, as if it had needed any at all. She understood that I would not be able to serve on the welcoming committee, and Rops's younger brother Gerald (a good seventy-five if he was a day) drove her to the airport alone. Yes, I promised Aunt T. that I would be sociable and come out to meet everyone as soon as I saw the lights of the big black car floating up our private drive.

But I wasn't and I didn't. I took to my room and drowsed before a television with the sound turned off. As the colors danced in the dark, I submitted more and more to an anti-social sleepiness. Finally I instructed Rops, by way of the estate-wide intercom, to inform Aunt T. and company that I wasn't feeling very well, needed to rest. This, I figured, would be in keeping with the façade of a harmless valetudinarian, and a perfectly normal one at that. A night-sleeper. Very good, I could hear them saying to their souls. And then, I swear, I actually turned off the television and slept real sleep in real darkness.

But things became less real at some point deep in the night. I must have left the intercom open, for I heard little metal voices emanating from that little metal square on my bedroom wall. In my state of quasi-somnolence it never occurred to me that I could simply get out of bed and make the voices go away by switching off that terrible box. And ter-

rible it indeed seemed. The voices spoke a foreign language, but it wasn't French, as one might have suspected. Something more foreign than that. Perhaps a cross between a madman talking in his sleep and the sonar screech of a bat. The voices chittered and chattered with each other in my dreams when I finally fell completely asleep. And they ceased entirely long before I awoke, for the first time in my life, to the bright eyes of morning.

The house was quiet. Even the servants seemed to have duties that kept them soundless and invisible. I took advantage of my wakefulness at that early hour and prowled unnoticed about the floors of the house, figuring everyone else was still in bed after their long and somewhat noisy night. The four rooms Aunt T. had set aside for our guests all had their big panelled doors closed: a room for the mama and papa, two others close by for the kids, and a chilly chamber at the end of the hall for the maiden sister. I paused a moment outside each room and listened for the revealing songs of slumber, hoping to know my relations better by their snores and whistles and monosyllables grunted between breaths. But they made none of the usual racket. They hardly made any sounds at all, though they echoed one another in making a certain noise that seemed to issue from the same cavity. It was a kind of weird wheeze, an open mouth panting from the back of the throat, the hacking of a tubercular demon. Or a very faint grating sound, as if some heavy object were being dragged across bare wooden floors in a distant part of the house; a muted cacophony. Thus, I soon abandoned my eavesdropping without regret.

I spent the day in the library, whose high windows I noticed were designed to allow a maximum of natural reading

light. However, I drew the drapes on them and kept to the shadows, finding morning sunshine not everything it was said to be. But it was difficult to get much reading done. Any moment I expected to hear foreign footsteps descending the double-winged staircase, crossing the black-and-white marble chessboard of the front hall, taking over the house. Nevertheless, despite my expectations, and to my increasing uneasiness, the family never appeared.

Twilight came and still no mama and papa, no sleepy-eyed son or daughter, no demure sister remarking with astonishment at the inordinate length of her beauty sleep. And no Aunt T., either. They must've had quite a time the night before, I thought. But I didn't mind being alone with the twilight. I undraped the three west windows, each of them a canvas depicting the same scene in the sky. My private *salon d'automne*.

It was an unusual sunset. Having sat behind opaque drapery all day, I had not realized that a storm was pushing in and that much of the sky was the precise shade of old suits of armor one finds in museums. At the same time, patches of brilliance engaged in a territorial dispute with the oncoming onyx of the storm. Light and darkness mingled in strange ways both above and below. Shadows and sunshine washed together, streaking the landscape in an unearthly study of glare and gloom. Bright clouds and black folded into each other in a no-man's land of the sky. The autumn trees turned in accordance with a strange season as their leaden-colored trunks and branches, along with their iron-red leaves, took on the appearance of sculptures formed in a dream, locked into an infinite and unliving moment, unnaturally timeless. The gray lake slowly tossed and tumbled in a deep sleep,

nudging unconsciously against its breakwall of numb stone. A scene of contradiction and ambivalence, a tragicomedic haze over all. A land of perfect twilight.

I was in exaltation: finally the twilight had come down to earth, and to me. I had to go out into this rare atmosphere, I had no choice. I left the house and walked to the lake and stood on the slope of stiff grass which led down to it. I gazed up through the trees at the opposing tones of the sky. I kept my hands in my pockets and touched nothing, except with my eyes.

Not until an hour or more had elapsed did I think of returning home. It was dark by then, though I don't recall the passing of the twilight into evening, for twilight has no edges. There were no stars anywhere, the storm clouds having moved in and wrapped up the sky. They began sending out tentative drops of rain. Thunder mumbled above and I was forced back to the house, cheated once again by the night. But I'll always remember savoring that particular twilight, unaware that there would be no others after it.

In the front hall of the house I called out names in the form of questions. “Aunt T.? Rops? Gerald? M. Duval? Madame?” Everything was silence. Where was everyone, I wondered. They couldn't still be asleep. I passed from room to room and found no signs of occupation. A day of dust was upon all surfaces. Where were the domestics? At last I opened the double doors to the dining room. Was I late for the supper Aunt T. had planned to honor our visiting family?

It appeared so. But if Aunt T. sometimes had me consume the forbidden fruit of flesh and blood, it was never directly from the branches, never the sap taken warm from the tree

of life itself. But here in fact were spread the remains of such a feast. It was the ravaged body of Aunt T. herself, though they'd barely left enough on her bones for identification. The thick white linen was clotted like an unwrapped bandage. “Rops!” I shouted. “Gerald, somebody!” But I knew the servants were no longer in the house, that I was alone.

Not quite alone, of course. This soon became apparent to my twilight brain as it dipped its way into total darkness. I was in the company of five black shapes which stuck to the walls and soon began flowing along their surface. One of them detached itself and moved toward me, a weightless mass which felt icy when I tried to sweep it away and put my hand right through the thing. *Another* followed, unhinging itself from a doorway where it hung down. A third left a blanched scar upon the wallpaper where it clung like a slug, pushing itself off to join the attack. Then came the others descending from the ceiling, dropping onto me as I stumbled in circles and flailed my arms. I ran from the room but the things had me closely surrounded. They guided my flight, heading me down hallways and up staircases. Finally they cornered me in a small room, a dusty little place I had not been in for years. Colored animals frolicked upon the walls, blue bears and yellow rabbits. Miniature furniture was draped with graying sheets. I hid beneath a tiny, elevated crib with ivory bars. But they found me and closed in.

They were not driven by hunger, for they had already feasted. They were not frenzied with a murderer's bloodlust, for they were cautious and methodical. This was simply a family reunion, a sentimental gathering. Now I understood how the Duvals could afford to be *sans préjugés*. They were worse than I, who was only a half-breed, hybrid, a mere mu-

latto of the soul: neither a blood-warm human nor a blood-drawing devil. But they—who came from an Aix on the map—were the purebreds of the family.

And they drained my body dry.

When I regained awareness once more, it was still dark and there was a great deal of dust in my throat. Not actually dust, of course, but a strange dryness I had never before experienced. And there was another new experience: hunger. I felt as if there were a chasm of infinite depth within me, a great abyss which needed to be filled—flooded with oceans of blood. I was one of them now, reborn into a hungry death. Everything I had shunned in my impossible, blasphemous ambition to avoid living and dying, I had now become. A sallow, ravenous thing. A beast with a hundred stirring hungers. André of the graveyards.

The five of them had each drunk from my body by way of five separate fountains. But the wounds had nearly sealed by the time I awoke in the blackness, owing to the miraculous healing capabilities of the dead. The upper floors were all in shadow now, and I made my way toward the light coming from downstairs. An impressionistic glow illuminating the wooden banister at the top of the stairway, where I emerged from the darkness of the second floor, inspired in me a terrible ache of emotion I'd never known before. A feeling of loss, though of nothing I could specifically name, as if somehow the deprivation lay in my future.

As I descended the stairs I saw that they were already waiting to meet me, standing silently upon the black and white squares of the front hall. Papa the king, mama the queen, the boy a knight, the girl a dark little pawn, and a bitchy maiden bishop standing behind. And now they had

my house, my castle, to complete the pieces on their side. On mine there was nothing.

"Devils," I screamed, leaning hard on the staircase rail. "Devils," I repeated, but they still appeared horribly undistressed, perhaps uncomprehending of my outburst. "*Diables*," I reiterated in their own loathsome tongue.

But neither was French their true language, as I found out when they began speaking among themselves. I covered my ears, trying to smother their voices. They had a language all their own, a style of speech well-suited to dead vocal organs. The words were breathless, shapeless rattlings in the backs of their throats, parched scrapings at the mausoleum portal. Arid gasps and dry gurgles were their dialects. These crackling noises were especially disturbing as they emanated from the mouths of things that had at least the form of human beings. But worst of all was my realization that I understood perfectly well what they were saying.

The boy stepped forward, pointing at me while looking back and speaking to his father. It was the opinion of this wine-eyed and rose-lipped youth that I should have suffered the same end as Aunt T. With an authoritative impatience the father told the boy that I was to serve as a sort of tour guide through this strange new land, a native who could keep them out of such difficulties as foreign visitors sometimes get into. Besides, he grotesquely concluded, *I was one of the family*. The boy was incensed and coughed out an incredibly foul characterization of his father. The things he said could only have been conveyed by that queer hacking patois, which suggested feelings and relationships of a nature incomprehensible outside of that particular world it mirrors

with disgusting perfection. It is the discourse of Hell on the subject of sin.

An argument ensued, the father's composure turning to an infernal rage and finally subduing the son with bizarre threats that have no counterparts in the language of ordinary malevolence. Monstrous possibilities were implied.

Finally the boy was silenced and turned to his aunt, seemingly for comfort. This woman of chalky cheeks and sunken eyes touched the boy's shoulder and easily drew him toward her with a single finger, guiding his body as if it were a balloon, weightless and toy-like. They spoke in sullen whispers, using a personal form of address that hinted at a long-standing and unthinkable allegiance between them.

Apparently encouraged by this scene, the daughter now stepped forward and used this same mode of address to get my attention. Her mother abruptly gagged out a single syllable at her. What she called her daughter might possibly be imagined, but only with reference to the lowliest sectors of the human world. Their own words, their choking rasps, carried all the dissonant overtones of a demonic orchestra in bad tune. Each perverse utterance was a rioting opera of evil, a choir shrieking pious psalms of intricate blasphemy and devout songs of enigmatic lust.

"I will not become one of you," I *thought* I screamed at them. But the sound of my voice was already so much like theirs that the words had exactly the opposite meaning I intended. The family suddenly ceased bickering among themselves. My outburst had consolidated them. Each mouth, cluttered with uneven teeth like a village cemetery overcrowded with battered gravestones, opened and smiled. The expression on their faces told me of something in my own.

They could see my growing hunger, see deep down into the dusty catacomb of my throat which cried out to be anointed with bloody nourishment. They knew my weakness.

Yes, they could stay in my house. (*Famished*.)

Yes, I could make arrangements to cover up the disappearance of the servants, for I am a wealthy man and know what money can buy. (*Please, my family, I'm famished*.)

Yes, their safety could be insured and their permanent asylum perfectly feasible. (*Please, I'm famishing to dust*.)

Yes, yes, yes. I agreed to everything; everything would be taken care of. (*To dust!*)

But first I begged them, for heaven's sake, to let me go out into the night.

Night, night, night, night. Night, night, night.

*

Now twilight is an alarm, a noxious tocsin which rouses me to an endless eve. There is a sound in my new language for that transitory time of day just before the dark hours. The sound clusters together curious shades of meaning and shadowy impressions, none of which belong to my former conception of an abstract paradise: the true garden of unearthly delights. The new twilight is a violator, desecrator, stealthy graverobber; death-bell, life-knell, curtain-riser; banshee, siren, howling she-wolf. And the old twilight is dead. I am even learning to despise it, just as I am learning to love my eternal life and eternal death. Nevertheless, I wish them well who would attempt to destroy my precarious immortality, for just as my rebirth has taught me the importance of beginnings, the idea of endings has also taken on a painfully tranquil significance. And I cannot deny those

who would avenge all those exsanguinated souls of my past and future. Yes, past and future. Endings and beginnings. In brief, Time now exists, measured like a perpetual holiday consisting only of midnight revels. I once had an old family from an old world, and now I have new ones. A new life, a new world. And this world is no longer one where I can languidly gaze upon rosy sunsets, but another in which I must fiercely draw a full-bodied blood from the night.

Night… after night… after night.

Masquerade Of A Dead Sword: A Tragedie (2010 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

First published in *Heroic Visions II*, 1986

> When the world uncovers some dark disguise,
> Embrace the darkness with averted eyes.
>
> —*Psalms Of The Silent*

I: Faliol's Rescue

No doubt the confusions of carnival night were in some measure to blame for many unforeseen incidents. Every violation of routine order was being committed by carousing masses, their high-register songs of celebration harmonizing with a low, droning pedal point which seemed to be sustained by the night itself. Having declared their town an enemy of quiescence, the people of Soldori had taken to the streets. There they conspired against solitude and, to accompanying gyrations of squealing abandon, sabotaged monotony. Even the duke, a cautious man and one not normally given to those extravaganzas perpetrated by his counterparts in Lynnese or Daranzella, was now holding a lavish masquerade, if only as a strategic concession to his subjects. Of

all the inhabitants of the Three Towns, those under the rule of the Duke of Soldori—occasionally to the duke's dismay—were the most loving of amusement. In every quarter of their usually sedate principality, frolicking merrymakers combed the night for a new paradise, and were as likely to find it in a blood-match as in a bewitching countenance. All seemed anxious, even frantic to follow blindly the entire spectrum of diversion, to dawdle about the lines between pain and pleasure, to obscure their vision of both past and future.

So three well-drunk and hog-faced men seated in a roisterous hostelry might well be excused for not recognizing Faliol, whose colors were always red and black. But this man, who had just entered the thickish gloom of that drinking house, was garbed in a craze of colors, none of them construed to a pointed effect. One might have described this outfit as a motley gone mad. Indeed, what lay beneath this fool's patchwork were the familiar blacks and reds that no other of the Three Towns—neither those who were dandies, nor those who were sword-whores, nor even those who, like Faliol himself, were both—would have dared to duplicate. But now these notorious colors were buried under a rainbow of rags which were tied about the man's arms, legs, and every other part of his person, seeming to hold him together like torn strips hurriedly applied to the storm-fractured joists of a sagging roof. Before he had closed the door of that cave-like room behind him, the draft rushing in from the street made his frayed livery come alive like a mass of tattered flags flapping in a calamitous wind.

But even had he not been cast as a tatterdemalion, there was still so much else about Faliol that was unlike his former

self. His sword, a startling length of blade, bobbed about unbuckled at his left side. His dagger, whose sheath bore a mirror of polished metal (which now seemed a relic of more dandified days), was strung loosely behind his left shoulder, ready to fall at any moment. And his hair was trimmed monkishly close to the scalp, leaving little reminder of a gloriously hirsute era. But possibly the greatest alteration, the greatest problem and mystery of Faliol's travesty of his own image, was the presence on his face of a pair of spectacles. And given that these spectacles were darkly tinged, as though fashioned from some murky substance, the eyes behind them were obscured.

Still, there remained any number of signs by which a discerning scrutiny could have identified the celebrated Faliol. For as he moved toward a seat adjacent to the alcove where the booming-voiced trio was ensconced, he strode with a scornful, somehow involuntary assuredness of which no reversals of fate could completely unburden him. And his boots, though their fine black leather had gone gray with the dust of roads that a zealous equestrian such as Faliol would never have trod, still jangled with a few of those once innumerable silver links from which dangled small, agate-eyed medallions, ones identical to the onyx-eyed amulet which in other days hung from a silver chain around his lean throat.

Now, however, no medallion ornamented Faliol's chest; and since he had lost or renounced the inkish eye of onyx, he had acquired two eyes of shadowed glass. Each lens of the spectacles reflected, like twin moons, the glow of the lantern above the place where Faliol seated himself. As if unaware that he was not settled in some cloistered cell of lucubration, he removed from somewhere within his shredded clothes a

small book having the words *Psalms of the Silent* inscribed upon its soft, worn cover. And the cover of the book was black, while the characters of its title were the red of autumn leaves.

“Faliol, a scholar?” someone whispered in the crowded depths of the room, while another added: “And a scholar of his own grief, so I've heard.”

Faliol unfixed the tiny silver clasp and opened the book somewhere toward its middle, where a thin strip of velvet marked his place. And if there had been a miniature mirror bound in place of the book's left-hand leaf, Faliol could have seen three thuggish men gazing mutely, not to say thoughtfully, in his direction. Moreover, if there had been a second mirror set at the same angle on the book's right-hand leaf, he could also have noticed a fourth pair of eyes spying on him from the other side of the hostelry's engrimed window panes.

But there were only stern-looking letters written—to be precise handwritten, in Faliol's own hand—upon the opposing leaves of the book. Thus Faliol could not have seen either of these parties who, for reasons separate or similar, were observing him. All he saw were two pale pages elegantly dappled by somber verses. Then a shadow passed across these pages, and another, and another.

The three men were now standing evenly spaced before Faliol, though he continued to read as if they were not present. He read until the lantern above was extinguished, its stump of tallow snuffed out by the middle man's grossly knuckled stumps of flesh. Clasping his book closed, Faliol replaced it within the rags around his heart and sat perfectly still. The three men seemed to watch in a trance of ugsome

hilarity at this slowly and solemnly executed sequence of actions. The face at the windowpanes merely pressed closer to witness what, in its view, was a soundless scene.

Some words of insult appeared to be aimed at the man in rags by the three men standing before him. The first of them splashed some ale upon the bespectacled personage, as did the second man from his enormous tankard. Then more ale —this time expectorated—was received by the victim as the third man's contribution to what became a series of petty torments. But Faliol remained silent and as motionless as possible, thereby expressing an attitude of mind and body which seemed only to provoke further the carnival-mad souls of the three Soldorians. As the moments passed, the men waxed more cruel and their torments more inventive. Finally, they jostled a bloody-mouthed Faliol out of his seat. Two of them pinioned him against the planks of the wall, while the trio's hulking third member snatched his spectacles.

A pair of blue eyes was suddenly revealed. They firmly clenched themselves closed, then reopened as if bursting out of black depths and into the light. Faliol dropped to his knees and his mouth stretched wide to let out a strangled scream—the scream of a mute under torture. But very soon his features relaxed, while his ragged chest began pumping up and down with an even rhythm. He rose to his feet.

The one who had taken Faliol's spectacles had turned away and his clumsy fingers were fiddling with delicate silver stems, fumbling with two shadowy lenses that were more precious than he knew. Thus amused and diverted, he did not perceive that Faliol had drawn his dagger from its

shoulder-sheath and was cutting away at his companions with stealth and savagery.

“Where—” he started to shout to his loutish comrades as they ran ripped and bloody from the hostelry. Then he turned about-face to feel Faliol's sword against his greasy leather doublet. He saw, he must have seen, that the blade was unclean but very sharp; and he must have felt it scrape playfully against the chain-mail vest concealed beneath his doublet's sorry cover. Soon Faliol was lowering his blade until it reached the spot where the vest's protection no longer protected. “Now put them on, that you might see,” he instructed the giant who held what appeared in his hands to be tiny toy spectacles. “Put… them… on,” he repeated in the toneless voice of one who was dead to all appeasement or mercy.

The giant, his lip-licking tongue visibly parched, obeyed the command. Upon doing so, his body went rigid and became as if fastened to the floor on which it stood.

Everyone in the room leaned closer to see the giant in dark spectacles, and so did the well-groomed face at the hostelry window. Most of the men laughed—drunkenly and anonymously—but a few remained silent, if they did not in fact become silent, at this sight. “And a scholar of the wildest folly, too,” someone whispered. Faliol himself grinned like a demon, his eyes widening at his work. After a few moments he returned his sword to its sheath, and even so the giant held his transfixed position. Faliol put away his dagger, and the giant did not budge a hair. Trapped within himself, he stood with paralyzed arms hanging beside his enormous flanks. The giant's face was extraordinarily pale, his grizzled cheeks like two mounds of snow that had been sown with

ashes. Above them, circles of glass gleamed like two black suns.

All laughter had ceased by now, and many turned away from the unwonted spectacle. The giant's meaty lips were the only part of him that moved, though very slowly and very much in the manner of a dying fish gasping in the dry air. But having seen through Faliol's spectacles, the giant was not dying in his body: only his mind was a corpse. “The wildest folly,” whispered the same voice.

Gently, almost contritely, Faliol removed the spectacles from the face of the dumbstruck idol, and he waited until he was outside the hostelry before replacing them on his own.

“Good sir,” called a voice from the shadows of the street. Faliol paused, but only as if considering the atmosphere of the night and not necessarily in response to a stranger who had accosted him. “Please allow me to identify myself with the name Streldone. I assume my messenger spoke with you last eve in Lynnese. How generous of you to come to Soldori to meet with me. Well, then, here is my coach,” he said, “so that we need not talk in all the confusion of carnival night.” And when the coach began moving down streets on the circumference of the festivities, this finely habited gentleman—though he was just barely more than a youth—continued to speak to a silent Faliol.

“I was informed you had arrived in Soldori not long before this very moment, and have been waiting for a discreet interval in which to approach you. Of course you were aware of my presence,” he said, pausing to scan Faliol's expressionless face. “How unfortunate that you were forced to reveal who you are back in that sty of a drinking house. But I suppose you couldn't allow yourself to undergo much more of

that treatment merely for the sake of anonymity. No harm done, I'm sure."

"And I am sure," Faliol replied in a monotone, "that three very sad men would disagree with you."

The young man laughed briefly at what he understood to be a witticism. "In any event, their kind will have their throats wrapped in the red cord sooner or later. The duke is quite severe when it comes to the lawlessness of others. Which brings me to what I require of you tonight, presuming that we need not bargain over the terms my messenger proposed to you in Lynnese. Very well," said Streldone, though obviously he had been prepared to haggle over the matter. But he left no pause which might have been filled with the second thoughts of this hired sword, who looked and acted more like one of the clockwork automatons which performed their mechanical routines high above the town square of Soldori. Thus, with a slow turn of his head and a set movement of his hand, Faliol received the jeweled pouch containing one-half his payment. Streldone promised that the other portion would follow upon the accomplishment of their night's work, as he now portrayed its reasons and aims.

It seemed there was a young woman of a noble and wealthy family, a princess in all but title whom Streldone loved and who loved him in return, accepting his proposal of marriage and cleaving to his vision of their future as two who would be one. But there was also another, who was called Wynge, though Streldone referred to him thereafter as the Sorcerer. As Streldone explained the situation, the Sorcerer had appropriated the young woman for himself. This unnatural feat was achieved, Streldone hated to say, not only through the powerful offices of the Duke of Soldori

himself, but also with the willing compliance of the young woman's father. Both men, according to Streldone, had been persuaded in this affair because the Sorcerer had promised to supply them, by means of alchemical transmutations of base metals into gold and silver, with an unending source of riches to finance their wars and other undertakings of ambition. Without bothering to embellish the point, Streldone declared that he and his beloved, in their present state of separation, were two of the most wretched beings in the world and desperate for assistance in their struggle to be reunited. And that carnival night would be the last opportunity for Faliol to untangle them from the controlling strings of the Sorcerer and his compatriots.

"Do I have your attention, sir?" Streldone asked.

Faliol vouchsafed his understanding of the matter by repeating to its last detail Streldone's account of his plight.

"Well, I am glad to know that your wits are still in order, however distracted you may seem. I have heard certain rumors, you understand. In any event, tonight the Sorcerer is attending the duke's masquerade at the palace. She will be with him. Help me steal her back, so that we may both escape from Soldori, and I will fill the empty part of that pouch."

Faliol asked if Streldone had possessed the foresight to have brought along a pair of costumes to enable their entrance to the masquerade. Streldone, somewhat vainly, produced from the shadows of the coach two such costumes, one that was appropriate to a knight of the old days and the other that of a court jester of the same period. Faliol reached out for the wildly patterned costume with the jeering mask.

“But I am afraid,” said Streldone, “that I intended that costume for myself. The other is more suited to allow your sword—”

“No sword will be needed,” Faliol assured his nervous companion. “This will be fitting,” he added, holding the hook-nosed fool's face opposite his own.

They were now traveling in the direction of the palace, and Soldori's carnival began to thicken about the wheels of Streldone's coach. Gazing upon the nocturnal confusion, Faliol's eyes were as dark and swirled with shadows as the raving night itself.

II: The Story Of The Spectacles

His eyes fixed and clouded as a blind man's, the mage sat before a small circular table upon which a single wax taper burned in a silver stick. Illuminated by that modest flame, the surface of the table was inlaid with esoteric symbols, a constellation of designs which reduced essential forces of existence to a few, rather picturesque, patterns. But the mage was not occupied with these. He was simply attending to someone who was raving in the shadows of a secret chamber. The hour was late and the night was without a moon. The narrow window behind the beardless, pallid face of the mage was a solid sheet of blackness that seemed to absorb the candlelight. Every so often someone would move before this window, his hands running through his thick dark hair as he spoke, or tried to speak. Occasionally he would move toward the candle flame, and a glimpse could be caught of his bold attire in blacks and reds, his shining blue eyes, his

fevered face. Calmly, the mage listened to the man's wild speech.

"Not *if* I have become mad but of what my madness consists is the knowledge I seek from you. And please understand that I have no hopes, only a searing curiosity to riddle the corpse of my dead soul. As for the assertion that I have always been engaged in deeds which one might deem mad, I would be obliged to answer—Yes, countless deeds, countless mad games of flesh and steel. Having confessed that, I would also avow that these were *sanctioned* provocations of chaos, known in some form to the body of the world and even blessed by it, if the truth be spoken. But I have provoked another thing, a new madness which arrives from a world that is on the wrong side of light, a madness that is unsanctioned and without the seal of our natural selves. It is a forbidden madness, a saboteur from outside the body of known laws. And as you know, I have been the subject of its devastation.

"Since the madness began working its ruin upon me, I have become an adept of every horror which can be thought or sensed or dreamed. In my very dreams—have I not told you of them?—there are scenes of slaughter without purpose, without constraint, and without end. I have crept through dense forests not of trees but of tall pikes planted in the earth; and upon each of them a crudely formed head has been fixed. These heads all wear faces which would forever blind the one who saw them anywhere but in a dream. And they follow my movements not with earthly eyes but with shadows rolling in empty sockets. Sometimes the heads speak as I pass through their uncanny ranks, telling me things I cannot bear to hear. Nor can I shut out their words, and I listen until I have learned the horrors of each brutal

head. And the voices from their lacerated mouths, so clear, so precise to my ears that every word is a bright flash in my dreaming brain, a brilliant new coin minted for the treasure house of hell. At the end of the mad dream these heads endeavor to laugh, creating a blasphemous babble which echoes throughout that terrible forest. And when I awaken, the night continues to reverberate with fading laughter.

"Yet why should I speak of waking from these dreams? For to awaken, as I once understood this miracle, means to reclaim a world of laws which for a time were lost, to rise into the light of the world as one falls into the darkness of dream. But for me there is no sense of breaking through the envelope of sleep. It seems that I remain a captive of these dreams, these visions. For when one leaves off, another begins, like a succession of connected rooms which will never lead to freedom. And for all I can know, I am even now the inhabitant of one of these rooms, and at any moment—I beg forgiveness, wise man—you may transform into a demon and begin to disembowel weeping children before my eyes and smear their entrails upon the floor so that in them you may read my future, a future without escape from those heads and from what comes after.

"For there is a citadel in which I am a prisoner and which holds within it a type of school—a school of torture. Ceremonial stranglers, their palms grooved by the red cord, stalk the corridors of this place or lie snoring in its shadows, dreaming of perfect throats. And somewhere the master carnifex, the supreme inquisitor, waits as I am taken from my cell and dragged across stone floors—until I am finally presented to this fiend with witless, rolling eyes. Then my

arms, my legs, everything is shackled, and I am screaming to die while the Torture of the Question…"

"Enough," said the mage without raising his voice.

"Yes, enough," the madman said. "And so have I said numberless times. But there is no end, there is no hope. And this endless, hopeless torment incites me with a desire to turn its power on others, and even to dream of turning it on all. To see the world drown in oceans of agony is the only vision which now brings me any relief from my madness, from a madness which is *not of this world*."

"Though neither is it of any other world," said the mage in the same quiet voice.

"But I have also had visions of butchering the angels," replied the madman, as if to argue the irreparable nature of his mania.

"You have envisioned precisely what you have been made to envision, and nothing that has risen from your own true being. But how could you have known this, when it is the nature of what you have seen—this Anima Mundi of the oldest philosophers and alchemists—to deceive and to pose as the soul of another world, and not as the soul of the world we know? There is only one world and one soul of that world, which appears in forms of beauty or bravery or madness according to how Anima Mundi would turn you. And no ordinary devising may turn you away from what it wills. This is the power that has made you what you now are, and would unmake you for its own design. It has played with you as it would a puppet."

"Then I will make myself its destruction."

"You cannot. Your very wish to destroy it is not yours but that of the thing itself. You are not who you are. You are only

what it would have you be."

"You speak as if it were a god of deceit and illusion."

"There is no other or truer way to speak of it. But no further words now," finished the mage.

He then instructed the madman to seat himself at the table of arcane designs and to wait there with eyes calmly closed. And for what remained of that moonless night the mage worked in another part of his dwelling, returning to the wretched dreamer just before dawn. In one of his hands was the product of his labors: a pair of strangely darkened spectacles, as if they had shadows sealed within them. These he fitted to the madman's face.

"Do not yet open your eyes, my unhappy friend, but heed my words. I know the visions you have known, for they are among the visions that all were born to know. There are eyes within our eyes, and when these others open all becomes confusion. The meaning of my long life consists of the endeavor to seize and settle these visions, until my natural eyes themselves have altered in accordance with my purpose. Now, for what reason I cannot say, Anima Mundi has revealed itself to you in its most essential aspect—that of *chaos at feast*. Having seen the face behind all its others, your life can never again be as you have known it. All the pleasures of the past are now defiled, all your hopes violated beyond hope. There are things which only madmen fear because only madmen may truly conceive of them. Your world is presently black with the scars of madness, but you must make it blacker still in order to find any solace. You have seen both too much and not enough. Through the shadow-fogged lenses of these spectacles, you will be blinded so that you may see with greater sight. Through their darkly

clouded glass *Anima Mundi* will diffuse into nothingness before you. What would murder another man's mind will bring yours peace.

"Henceforth, all things will be in your eyes a distant play of shadows that fretfully strive to engage you, ghosts that clamor to pass themselves as actualities, masks that desperately flit about to conceal the stillness of the void behind them. Henceforth, I say, all things will be reduced in your eyes to their inconsequential essence. And all that once shined for you—the steel, the stars, the eyes of another—will lose its luster and take its place among the other shadows. All will be dulled in the power of your vision, which will give you the ability to see that the greatest power, the only power, is to care for nothing.

"Please know that this is the only means by which I may help you. You have been made ready to receive this salvation by your very torments. Though we cannot overthrow the hold that Anima Mundi has on the others of this earth, we must still try as we can. For as long as the soul of the world has its way, it will grieve all in whom it lives. But it will not live in you on the condition you obey one simple rule: You must never be without these spectacles or your furies will return to you. There, now you may open your eyes."

Faliol sat very still for some time, an ease of heart within him as he gazed through the spectacles. At first he did not notice that one of the mage's own eyes was closed, covered by a sagging eyelid. When at last he saw this and perceived the sacrifice, he said, "And how may I serve you, wise man?"

Beyond the window at the back of the two figures, something seemed to be at watch. Neither man took note of the image, which was so obscure as to be nearly invisible. Some

would call it a face, yet its features were translucent such that not even the sharpest eye could read them clearly. Nor could any eye outside that room where Faliol and the mage sat quietly conversing suffer to behold such a vision.

III: Anima Mundi

While the revelers in the streets of Soldori remedied their discontents by throwing off the everyday face of orthodoxy, those attending the masquerade at the duke's palace found their deliverance by donning other faces, other bodies, and perhaps other souls. The anonymity of that night—no unmasking was expected to be held—enabled a multitude of sins against taste, from the most subtle to the most grotesque indiscretions. The society of the court had transformed itself into a race of gods or monsters, competing at once with the brightest and highest of stars and the strangest of the world's lower creatures. Many would undoubtedly spend the succeeding days or weeks in darkened rooms behind closed doors, so that the effects their disguises had wrought on their bodies might be known to none. For a few rare spirits, this by necessity would be their last appearance in the eyes of the court before a final seclusion. All were quite clearly arrayed as if something unparalleled, and possibly conclusive, was to occur that night. Musicians played in several of the palace's most sumptuous and shimmering halls, glittering glasses were filled by fountains of unnaturally colored wine, and maskers swarmed about like living gargoyles freed from the cathedral's stone. All, or nearly all, were straining for some unheard-of antic, suffering the pleasures of expectancy.

But as the hours passed, hopes dissolved. The duke—in essence a simple man, even a dull one—took no initiative to unloose the abundant possibilities of the masquerade; and, as if instinctively aware of these perilous directions, he restrained the efforts of others to pursue them and thereby digress in a wayward manner from the night's steadily unwinding course. No petitioning could sway him. He allowed several odd witticisms to pass unacknowledged, and he feigned that certain dubious suggestions and proposals were abstruse to his mind. Unnourished by any source within the duke's character, every attempt at innovation curled at its colorful edges and died. The initial strangeness of the masked gathering went stale. Voices began to sound as though they were transacting business of some tedious sort, and even the sight of a jester, albeit one with darkness within the eyes of his mask, offered no special merriment to this sullen assembly.

Accompanying the jester, who made no lively movements, was a knight out of armor, dressed in radiant blues and golds, a crusader's cross emblazoned upon his chest, and over his face a white silk mask of blandly noble expression. The odd duo progressed from room to room of the palace, as if they were negotiating a thick wood in search of something or someone. The knight was manifestly nervous, his hand too obviously ready to go for the sword at his side, his head patrolling with skittish alertness the bizarre world around him. The jester, on the other hand, was altogether composed and methodical, and with excellent reason: he knew, as the knight did not, that their purpose was not a difficult one, as they would enjoy the complicity of Wynge himself, whom the knight had called the Sorcerer and whom the jester ad-

dressed as a wise man mage. With this advantage, Faliol might easily assist the knight in escaping Soldori. Not that such heroics were any longer of concern to Faliol, who was merely serving the mage in a machination to break the duke. The alchemical transformation that the ruler desired would indeed take place, though not precisely as promised. What reserves of wealth the duke and his conspirator possessed would tonight undergo, per the plan of the mage, a *reverse* alchemy that would leave them paupers. And then his work would be done in Soldori, such as he could accomplish what he set out to do.

The knight and the jester now paused at the arched entrance to the last, and most intimate, of the masquerade's many rooms. Pulling at the knight's golden sleeve, the jester angled his pointed, sneering muzzle toward a costumed pair in the far corner. The indicated figures were appareled as monarchs of the old days, a king and queen in ancient robes and stoles and many-horned crowns.

"How can you be sure they are the ones?" whispered the knight to the buffoon at his side.

"Approach and take her hand. You will be sure. But say nothing until you have led yourselves back through these rooms and to freedom."

"But the king might well be the Sorcerer in disguise," objected the knight. "He could have us both executed."

"Do as I tell you, though I cannot tell you all. You will see me greet the king and caper about as his jester. Believe me when I say that there is no sorcerer, only one who does what he can in this world against powers that can never be undone. And he has been working for your cause even before you knew of its troubles. Trust me that all will be well."

“I do trust you,” said the knight, as he furtively stuffed a jeweled pouch twice the size of the first into the belt of the jester, though Faliol cared nothing for the copious reward.

The two characters separated and merged with the murmuring crowd. The jester arrived first at their destination. From a distance he seemed to speak a few words into the king's ear and then suddenly leaped back to play the fool before him, hopping about wildly. The knight bowed before the queen and then without ostentation led her away to other rooms. Though her mask covered the expression beneath it, the manner in which she placed her hand upon the knight's appeared to reveal her knowledge of his identity. After they had gone, the jester ceased his antics and stood close to the statue-like king.

“I shall watch the duke's men around us, who may have been watching you, wise man.”

“And I shall see that our two little babes find their way through the forest,” replied the mock-monarch, who abruptly strode off.

But that was not part of your design, thought Faliol. And neither was the king's roguish voice that of the solemn mage. The dark eyes of the jester's mask followed the movements of the impostor until he became lost in the throng. Faliol had just started in pursuit when a strange commotion in another part of the palace educed much talk on all sides.

It seemed that something unheard-of had finally occurred, though it did not gladden any of those who had hoped for a unique happening on that carnival night.

The disturbance originated in the centermost of that labyrinth of capacious rooms composing the arena of the masquerade. To the surrounding as well as the more peri-

pheral rooms, including the one in which Faliol was now caught by the crushing crowd, there first traveled what sounded like cries of amusement. These quickly transformed, however, into ambiguous outbursts of surprise unto the edge of shock. Finally, the uproar took on the character of intense horror—all voices in alarm and confusion. Tidings passed rapidly, though less and less reliably, from mouth to mouth, room to room. Something terrible had happened, something which had begun, or was initially perceived, as a fabulous hoax. No one knew exactly how it was possible, but there suddenly appeared an outlandish spectacle in the midst of the most congested room of that night's affair. The matter of the event was that two participants in the masque, without being spied by those around them, had donned costumes which went far beyond the most gruesome seen beforehand at the palace gathering. Among some persons, word circulated about semblances most closely akin to giant leeches or worms, for they did not walk upright but writhed along the floor as if absent of bones. Others heard that these prodigies of disguise possessed countless tiny legs, and thus more properly resembled centipedes of some type. Still others averred that what was now in their company were not masqueraders but things inhuman in nature, having many-taloned claws, reptilian tails, serpent faces, and an overall composition of fantastical beasts which could not be dissembled by man nor woman. But whatever may have constituted the true substance and form of these beings, at some stage they affected the crowd with a panic past all reckoning. And however subsequent actions were construed to transpire, the consequence was that these bizarre intruders

were hacked and torn and trampled owing to an unreasoning revulsion for their aspect, or many aspects.

Tragically, once the massacre was accomplished, it was not the slaughtered remains of two uncanny monsters that the masqueraders, their masks removed, looked down upon. Instead, it was two of their own—a knight and queen of the old days—whose blood was spreading across the ornate designs of the palace floor. Their bodies, which they had feared would be lastingly parted, were now all but indistinguishable from each other.

Throwing off his jester's face, Faliol worked himself near enough to the scene to view the horror with his own shaded eyes. A tragedy, yes, but not such that would return Faliol to his furies. For the image he saw immediately took its place among the seamless and unending flow of hellish eidola which constituted Anima Mundi and which, in his vision, was a monotonous tapestry of the terrible ceaselessly unfurling itself in the faintest shades of gray. Thus, the appalling tableau was neither more nor less sinister in his sight than any other which the world might show him.

“Look again, Fa-fa-faliol,” said a voice at his back, as a forceful boot propelled him toward the carnage.

But why was everything painted with such brilliance now, when a moment ago it was all so insipid? Why did every piece of mutilated flesh pulse with color? And why was Faliol wholly benumbed by these red-smeared forms and their unhappy fate? He had been charged to save them and he could do… nothing. His thoughts were now careening wildly through crimson corridors within him, madly seeking solutions but falling at every turn into blind corners and flailing hopelessly against something immovable, im-

possible. He pressed his hands over his face, hoping to blind himself to the scene. But everything remained invincibly there before his eyes—everything save his spectacles.

Now the duke's voice broke the brief lull of the dazed and incredulous assembly. The enraged sovereign shouted orders, demanded answers. How justified had proved his misgivings concerning the masquerade. He had long known that something of this nature might occur, and had done what he could to prevent its coming to pass. On the spot, he outlawed all future occasions of this kind and called for arrests and interrogations, the Torture of the Question to be liberally implemented. Exodus was instantaneous—the palace became a chaos of fleeing freaks.

"Faliol!" called a voice that sounded too clear, within all the confusion, to have its origin outside his own mind. "I have what you're looking for. They're with me now, right here in my hand, not lost forever."

When Faliol turned around, he saw the masked king standing some distance away, unmolested by the frantic mob. The king was holding out the spectacles as if they were the dangling head of a conquered foe. Fighting his way toward the unknown persecutor, Faliol would chase him down and reclaim sanity, though not before he had barbarously dispatched the fiend. Yet he could not catch up to this figure which led him through all the rooms where the masquerade once flourished, and then deeper into the palace. At the end of a long silent corridor, the gaudy, flapping train of a royal robe disappeared through a doorway. Faliol followed the shape and at last entered a dim chamber with a single window, before which stood the mummer in a sparkling silk mask. The spectacles were still held by the velvet fingers of a

tightly gloved hand. Watching as the dark lenses flashed in the candlelight, Faliol's eyes burned as much with questions as with madness.

"Where is the mage?" he demanded.

"The mage is no more."

"Then tell me who are you before I send you to hell?"

"You know who I am. But say I'm a sorcerer if that is well with you."

"And you killed the mage as you did the others."

"The others? How could you have not heard that rattling pantomime, all those swords and swift feet? Did you not hear that there was a pair of leviathan leeches, or something in that way, menacing the guests? True, I had a hand in the illusion, but my hand contained no gouging blade. A shambles, you saw it with your own eyes."

"In their fate you saw your own future. Even a sorcerer may be killed."

"Agreed, even a sorcerer with three eyes, or two eyes, or one."

"Who are you to have destroyed the mage?"

"In fact, he destroyed himself—a heroic act, I'm sure. And he did it before *my* own eyes, as if in spite. As for myself, I confess that I am disappointed to be so far beneath your recognition. We have met previously, please remember. But it was many years past, and I suppose you became forgetful as well as dim-sighted once you put those pieces of glass over your eyes. You see why the mage had to be stopped. He ruined you as a madman, as *my* madman.

"But you might recall that you had another career before the madness took you, did you not? Buh-buh-brave Faliol. Do you not remember how you were made as such? Do you

not wish to remember that you were Faliol the dandy before we met on the road that day? It was I—in my role as a charm seller—who outfitted you with that onyx-eyed amulet which you once wore around your neck. It was that bauble which made you the skillful mercenary you once were, and that you loved to be.

"And how everyone else loved you that way: to see a weakling become a man of strength and of steel is the stuff of public comment, of legend, and of diversion in general. And how much more do they love to witness the reverse of this process: to see the mighty laid low, the lord of the sword made mad. This was the little drama I had planned. You were supposed to be *my* madman, Faliol, not the imperturbable fool of that magician. You were supposed to be a real lost soul of torments in red and black, not a pathetic monk chanting silent psalms in pale breaths. Do you not understand? It was Wynge who ruined you, who undid all my schemes for your tragic and colorful history. Because of him I was forced to change my plans, which are many and touch the lives of all. Yes, it was your mage, who had wrested his soul from me and believed he could do the same for you. Blame him for the slaughter of those innocents and for what you are about to suffer. You know my ways. We are not strangers."

"No, demon horror, we are not. You are indeed the foul thing the wise man described to me, all the dark powers which we cannot understand but only hate."

"Poor Faliol. How wrong you are to contend that the one who stands before you is hated, whatever few enemies I may have. Do you hear those rhapsodic voices in the streets below? They are not filled with hate. Even when I excruciate

them, they make excuses for me. They could not possibly hold a greater love for what gives them all they have, however little it may sometimes come to. But I would never go so far that they would turn against their own perpetuity. Only as they live do I live on. And the exceptional destinies of heroes and magicians, of kings and queens, saints and martyrs —these have special roles to perform in my scheme. From the highest to the lowest, they are all my children, and through their eyes I see my own glory."

"You see but your own foulness."

"No, the foulness is yours alone to lay eyes on, my dear Faliol. For those enamored of their continuance, no foulness exists. You have worn these spectacles too long and, to my disappointment, still see too much. You have seen me as others have not, if that pleases you, and for that you must come to an end. This is a privileged doom for those such as yourself. A type of consolation."

"You have said enough."

"To be sure. My time is precious. And yet I have not said what I came here to say, or rather to ask. You know the question, do not deny it, Faliol. The one you dreamed in those mad dreams I sent you. The torture of the question you dreaded to hear asked, and dreaded more to have answered."

"Demon!"

"What is the face of the soul of the world?"

"No, it is not a face… it is only—"

"Yes, there is a face, Faliol. And you will see it," said the masked figure as it peeled away its mask. "But why have you hidden your eyes that way, Faliol? And why have you fallen to your knees? Do you not appreciate the vision I have shown you? Could you ever have imagined that your exist-

ence would lead you into the presence of such a sight? Your spectacles cannot save you now. They are only so much glinting glass—hark to my grinding them underfoot upon the cool marble of the floor. No more spectacles, Faliol. And I think, too, no more Faliol. Can you understand what I am telling you now, jester? Well, what have you to say? Nothing? How black your madness must be to make you so rude. How black. But see, even if you will not, how I have provided these escorts to show you the way back to the carnival, which is where a buffoon belongs. And be sure that you make my legions of admirers laugh, or I will punish you. Yes, I can still punish you, Faliol. A living man can always be punished, so remember to be good. I will be watching. I am always watching. Farewell, then, fool."

A glazen-eyed guard on either side of him, Faliol was dragged from the duke's palace and given to the crowd which still rioted in the streets of Soldori. And the crowd embraced the mad jester, hoisting his jingling form upon their shoulders, shaking him like a toy as they carried him along. In its scheme to strangle silence forever, Soldori's unruly populace bellowed a robust refrain to Faliol's sickly moans. Into an onyx-black night his eyes gazed and his mind vanished.

But there must have been some moment, however brief, in which Faliol regained his old enlightenment and which allowed him to accomplish such a crucial and triumphant action. Was it solely by his own sleeping strength, fleetingly aroused, that he attained his greatest prize? If not, then what power could have enabled his trembling hands to reach so deeply into those haggard sockets, and with a gesture brave and sure dig out the awful seeds of his suffering? How-

ever it was done, the deed was done well. For as Faliol perished his face was flushed with a crimson glory.

And the crowd fell silent, and a new kind of confusion spread among them—those heads which were always watching—when it was found that what they were bearing through the streets of Soldori was only Faliol's victorious corpse.

Masquerade Of A Dead Sword: A Tragedie (1989 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

First published in *Heroic Visions II*, 1986

> When the world uncovers some dark disguise,
> Embrace the darkness with averted eyes.
>
> —*Psalms Of The Silent*

I: Faliol's Rescue

No doubt the confusions of carnival night were to blame, in some measure, for many unforeseen incidents. Every violation of routine order was being perpetrated by the carousing mob, their cries of celebration providing the upper voices to a strange droning pedal point which seemed to be sustained by the night itself. Having declared their town an enemy of silence, the citizens of Soldori took to the streets; there they conspired against solitude and, to accompanying gyrations of squealing abandon, sabotaged monotony. Even the duke, a cautious man and one not normally given to those gaudy agendas of his counterparts in Lynnese or Daranzella, was now holding an extravagant masquerade, if

only as a strategic concession to the little patch of world under his rule. Of all the inhabitants of the Three Towns, the subjects of the Duke of Soldori—occasionally to the duke's own dismay—were the most loving of amusement. In every quarter of this principality, frolicking celebrants combed the night for a new paradise, and were as likely to find it in a blood-match as in a song. All seemed anxious, even frantic to follow blindly the entire spectrum of diversion, to dawdle about the lines between pain and pleasure, to obscure their vision of both past and future.

So perhaps three well-drunk and boar-faced men seated in a roisterous hostelry could be excused for not recognizing Faliol, whose colors were always red and black. But this man, who had just entered the thickish gloom of that drinking house, was attired in a craze of colors, none of them construed to a pointed effect. One might have described this outfit as motley gone mad. Indeed, perhaps what lay beneath this fool's patchwork were the familiar blacks and reds that no other of the Three Towns—neither those who were dandies, nor those who were sword-whores (however golden their hearts), nor even those who, like Faliol himself, were both—would have dared to parody. But these notorious colors were now buried deep within a rainbow of rags which were tied about the man's arms, legs, and at every other point of his person, seeming to hold him together like torn strips hurriedly applied to the storm-fractured joists of a sagging roof. Before he had closed the door of that cave-like room behind him, the draft rushing in from the street made his ragged livery come alive like a mass of tattered flags flapping in a calamitous wind.

But even had he not been cast as a tatterdemalion, there was still so much else about Faliol that was unlike his former self. His sword, a startling length of blade to be pulled along by this ragman, bobbed about unbuckled at his left side. His dagger, whose sheath bore a mirror of polished metal (which now seemed a relic of more dandified days), was strung loosely behind his left shoulder, ready to fall at any moment. And his hair was trimmed monkishly close to the scalp, leaving little reminder of a gloriously hirsute era. But possibly the greatest alteration, the greatest problem and mystery of Faliol's travesty of his own image, was the presence on his face of a pair of… spectacles. And owing that the glass of these spectacles was unevenly blemished, as though murky currents flowed beneath their brittle surface, the eyes behind them were obscured.

Still, there remained any number of signs by which a discerning scrutiny could have identified the celebrated Faliol. For as he moved toward a seat adjacent to the alcove where the booming-voiced trio was ensconsed, he moved with a scornful, somehow involuntary assuredness of which no reversals of fate could completely unburden him. And his boots, though their fine black leather had gone gray with the dust of roads that a zealous equestrian such as Faliol would never have trod, still jangled with a few of those once innumerable silver links from which dangled small, agate-eyed medallions, ones exactly like that larger, onyx-eyed medallion which in other days hung from a silver chain around his lean throat. The significance of this particular ornament was such that Faliol—though often questioned, but never twice by the same inquisitor—avoided revelations of any kind.

Now, however, no medallion of any kind was displayed upon Faliol's chest; and since he had lost or renounced the inkish eye of onyx, he had acquired two eyes of shadowed glass. Each lens of the spectacles reflected, like twin moons, the glow of the lantern above the place where Faliol seated himself. As if unaware that he was not settled in some cloistered cell of lucubration, he removed from somewhere within his shredded clothes a small book having the words *Psalms of the Silent* written in raised letters upon its soft, worn cover. And the cover was black, while the letters were the red of autumn leaves.

“Faliol, a scholar?” someone whispered in the crowded depths of the room, while another added: “And a scholar of his own grief, so I've heard.”

Faliol unfixed the tiny silver clasp and opened the book somewhere toward its middle, where a thin strip of red velvet cloth, one the same shade as the letters upon the cover of the book, marked his place. And if there had been a miniature mirror bound in place of the book's left-hand leaf, Faliol could have seen three thuggish men gazing mutely, not to say thoughtfully, in his direction. Moreover, if there had been a second mirror set at the same angle on the book's right-hand leaf, he could also have noticed a fourth pair of eyes spying on him from the other side of the hostelry's engrimed window panes.

But there were only long, stern-looking letters written—to be precise handwritten, in Faliol's own hand—upon the opposing leaves of the book. Thus Faliol could not have seen either of these parties who, for reasons separate or similar, were observing him. He saw only two pale pages elegantly

dappled by the words of somber verses. Then a shadow passed across these pages, and another, and another.

The three men were now standing evenly spaced before Faliol, though he continued to read as if they were not present. He read until the lantern above was extinguished, its stump of tallow snuffed out by the middleman's hugely knuckled stumps of flesh. Clasping his book closed, Faliol replaced it within the rags around his heart and sat perfectly still. The three men seemed to watch in a trance of ugsome hilarity at this slowly and solemnly executed sequence of actions. The face at the windowpanes merely pressed closer to witness what, in its view, was a soundless scene.

Some harsh words appeared to be addressed to the man in rags by the three men standing before him. The first of them splashed some ale in the spectacled face, as did the second man from his enormous tankard. Then more ale—this time expectorated—was received by the victim as the third man's contribution to what became quite a lengthy series of petty torments. But Faliol remained silent and as motionless as possible, thereby expressing an attitude of mind and body which seemed only to provoke further the carnival-mad souls of the three Soldorians. As the moments passed, the men waxed more cruel and their torments more inventive. Finally, they jostled a bloody-mouthed Faliol out of his seat, two of them pinioned him against the planks of the wall, someone snatched his spectacles...

Two blue eyes were suddenly revealed: they firmly clenched themselves closed, then reopened as if bursting out of black depths and into the light. Faliol's mouth stretched wide to let out a perfectly silent scream or one beyond human hearing—the scream of a mute under torture. But very

soon his features relaxed, while his ragged chest began pumping up and down with an even rhythm.

The one who had taken Faliol's spectacles had turned away and his clumsy fingers were fiddling with delicate silver stems, fumbling with two shadowy lenses that were more precious than he knew. Thus amused and diverted, he did not perceive that Faliol was terrifying both of his companions out of their wits, that they had loosened their grasp on him, and that he had drawn his dagger from its shoulder-sheath.

“Where—” he started to shout to his loutish comrades as they ran bleeding from the hostelry's horror. Then he turned about-face to feel Faliol's sword against his greasy leather doublet. He saw, he must have seen, that the blade was unclean but very sharp; and he must have felt it scrape playfully against the chain-mail vest concealed beneath his doublet's sorry cover. Soon Faliol was lowering his blade until it reached the spot where the vest's protection no longer protected. “Now put them on, that you might see,” he quietly instructed the giant with the pair-of tiny toy spectacles. “Put… them… on,” he said in a calm, dead voice.

The giant, his lip-licking tongue visibly parched, obeyed the command.

Everyone in the room leaned closer to so the giant in dark spectacles, and so did the well-groomed face at the hostelry window. Most of the men laughed—drunkenly and anonymously—but a few remained silent, if they did not in fact become silent, at this sight. “And a scholar of the wildest folly, too,” someone whispered. Faliol himself grinned like a demon, his eyes widening at his work. After a few moments he returned his sword to its sheath, and even so the giant held

his transfixed position. Faliol put away his dagger, and the giant did not budge a hair. A hopeless paralytic, he stood with arms hanging limp and thick at his enormous flanks, slightly trembling. The giant's face was extraordinarily pale, his grizzled cheeks like two mounds of snow that had been sown with ashes. Above them, circles of glass gleamed like two black suns.

All laughter had ceased by now, and many turned away from the unwonted spectacle. The giant's meaty lips were opening and closing, very slowly and very much in the manner of a dying fish gasping in the dry air. But the giant, having worn Faliol's own eyes, was not dying in his body: only his mind was a corpse. “The wildest folly,” whispered the same voice.

Gently, almost contritely, Faliol removed the spectacles from the face of the grotesque idol, though he waited until he was outside the hostelry before replacing them on his own.

“Sir,” called a voice from the shadows of the street. Faliol paused, but only as if considering the atmosphere of the night and not necessarily in response to an unknown accoster. “Please allow me to identify myself with the name Streldone. My messenger spoke with you in Lynnese? Good, that is a blessing. Here is my coach, so that we need not talk in all this confusion,” he said, gesturing toward the jerking shadows of that carnival night. And when the coach began moving down streets on the circumference of the festivities, this expensively attired man—though he was just barely more than a youth-continued to speak to a silent Faliol.

“I was informed that you had arrived in Soldori not long ago, and have been following you since, waiting for a dis-

creet moment to approach you. Of course you were aware of my presence," he said, pausing to scan Faliol's expressionless face. "Well, but this is all something I know nothing about. In any event, how unfortunate that you were forced to reveal yourself back in that sty of a drinking house. But I suppose you couldn't allow yourself to undergo much more of that treatment merely for the sake of anonymity. No harm done, I'm sure."

"And I am sure," Faliol replied in a monotone, "that three very sad men would disagree with you."

The young man laughed briefly at what he understood to be a witticism. "In any event, their kind will have their throats wrapped in the red cord sooner or later. The duke is quite severe when it comes to the lawlessness of others. Which brings me to what I require of you tonight, assuming that we need not bargain over the terms my messenger proposed to you in Lynesse. Very well," said Streldone, though obviously he had been prepared to haggle over the matter. But he left no pause which might have been filled with the second thoughts of this hired sword, who looked and acted more like one of the clockwork automatons which performed their mechanical routines high above the town square of Soldori. Thus, with a slow turn of his head and a set movement of his hand, Faliol received the jeweled pouch containing one-half his payment. Streldone promised that the other portion would follow upon the accomplishment of their night's work, as he now portrayed its reasons and aims.

It seemed there was a young woman of a noble and wealthy family, a young woman whom Streldone loved and who loved him in return. At least she loved him to the point of accepting his proposal of marriage and cleaving to his vis-

ion of their future as two who would be one. But there was also another, a man who called himself, or who was called, Wynge. Streldone refered to him thereafter as the Sorcerer, by way of further severing his adversary from the dignity of an authentic name. As Streldone explained the situation, the Sorcerer had appropriated the young woman for himself. This unnatural feat was achieved, Streldone hated to say not only with the compliance of the young woman's father, but also through the powerful offices of the Duke of Soldori himself. Both men, according to Streldone, had been persuaded in this affair because the Sorcerer had promised to supply them, by means of alchemical transmutations of base metals into gold and silver, with an unending source of riches to finance their wars and other undertakings of ambition. Without bothering to embellish the point, Streldone declared that he and his beloved, in their present state of separation, were two of the most wretched beings in all the world and two of the most deserving of assistance in their struggle to be reunited. And tonight Faliol must help untangle them from the taut, controlling strings of the Sorcerer and his compatriots in evil.

"Do I have your attention, sir?" Streldone abruptly asked.

Faliol vouchsafed his understanding of the matter by repeating to its last detail Streldone's account of his plight.

"Well, I am glad to know that your wits really are in order, however distracted you may seem. In any event, tonight the Sorcerer is attending the duke's masquerade at the palace. She will be with him. Help me steal her back, so that we may both escape from Soldori, and I will fill the empty part of that pouch."

Faliol asked if Streldone had possessed the foresight to have brought along a pair of costumes to enable their entrance to the masquerade. Streldone, somewhat vainly, produced from the shadows of the coach two such costumes, one that was appropriate to a knight of the old days and the other that of a court jester of the same period. Faliol reached out for the wildly patterned costume with the jeering mask.

“But I am afraid,” said Streldone, “that I intended that costume for myself. The other is more suited to allow your sword—”

“No sword will be needed,” Faliol assured his nervous companion. “This will be everything,” he added, holding the hook-nosed fool's face opposite his own.

They were now traveling in the direction of the palace, and Soldori's carnival began to thicken about the wheels of Streldone's coach. Gazing upon the nocturnal confusion, Faliol's eyes were as dark and swirled with shadows as the raving night itself.

II: The Story of the Spectacles

His eyes fixed and clouded as a blind man's, the mage sat before a small circular table upon which a single wax taper burned in its plain silver stick. Illuminated by that modest flame, the surface of the table was inlaid with esoteric symbols, a constellation of designs which reduced essential forces of existence to a few, rather picturesque, patterns. But the mage was not occupied with these. He was simply listening to someone who was raving in the shadows of that most secret chamber. The hour was late and the night was without a moon: the narrow window behind the beardless, pallid face of the mage was a solid sheet of blackness gleam-

ing in the candlelight. Every so often someone would move before this window, his hands running through his thick dark hair as he spoke, or tried to speak. Occasionally he would move toward the candleflame, and a glimpse could be caught of his fine attire in blacks and reds, his shining blue eyes, his fevered face. Calmly, the mage listened to the man's wild speech.

"Not *if* I have become mad but of what my madness consists is the knowledge I seek from you. And please understand that I have no hopes, only a searing curiosity to riddle the corpse of my dead soul. As for the assertion that I have always been engaged in deeds which one might deem mad, I would be obliged to answer—Yes, countless deeds, countless mad games of flesh and steel. Having confessed that, I would also avow that these were *sanctioned* provocations of chaos, known in some form to the body of the world and even blessed by it, if the truth be spoken. But I have provoked another thing, a new madness which arrives from a world that is on the wrong side of light, a madness that is unsanctioned and without the seal of our natural selves. It is a forbidden madness, a saboteur from outside the body of known laws. And as you know, I have been the subject of its sabotage.

"Since the madness began working its destruction, I have become an adept of every horror which can be thought or sensed or dreamed. In my very dreams—have I not told you of them?—there are scenes of slaughter without purpose, without constraint, and without end. I have crept through dense forests not of trees but of tall pikes planted in the earth; and upon each of them a crudely formed head has been fixed. These heads all wear faces which would forever blind the one who saw them anywhere but in a dream. And

they follow my movements not with earthly eyes but with shadows rolling in empty sockets. Sometimes the heads speak as I pass through their hideous ranks, telling me things I cannot bear to hear. Nor can I shut out their words, and I listen until I have learned the horrors of each brutal head. And the voices from their ragged mouths, so clear, so precise to my ears, that every word is a bright flash in my dreaming brain, a brilliant new coin minted for the treasure houses of hell. At the end of my mad dream the heads make an effort to… laugh, creating a blasphemous babble which echoes throughout that terrible forest. And when I awaken I find myself standing on some hillside where I have never been, and for a moment the night continues to reverberate with fading laughter.

"But did I say that I awoke? If I did, then that is only one more madness among many. For to awaken, as I once understood this miracle, means to reinherit a world of laws which for a time were lost, to rise into the light of the world as one falls into the darkness of dream. But for me there is no sense of breaking through the envelope of sleep, that delicate membrane which excludes merely a single universe while containing countless more. It seems that I remain a captive of these dreams, these visions. For when that one leaves off this one begins, each giving way to the other like a labyrinth of connected room which will never lead to freedom beyond their strange walls. And for all that I can know, I am even now the inhabitant of such a room, and at any moment—I beg forgiveness, wise man—you may begin to disembowel weeping children before my eyes and smear their entrails upon the floor so that in them you may read my future, a fu-

ture without escape from those heads, that hillside, and from what comes after.

"There is a citadel in which I am a prisoner and which holds within it a type of school, a school of torture. Ceremonial stranglers, their palms grooved by the red cord, stalk the corridors of this place or lie snoring in its shadows, dreaming of perfect throats. Artists of mayhem curse softly as their mutilated canvasses prematurely expire of their elegant lacerations. And somewhere the master carnifex, the supreme inquisitor waits as I am dragged across crude, incredibly crude floors and am presented to his rolling, witless eyes. Then my arms, my legs, everything is shackled, and I am screaming to die while the Torture of the Question..."

"Enough," said the mage without raising his voice.

"Enough," the madman repeated. "And so have I said numberless times. But there is no end, there is no hope. And this endless, hopeless torment incites me with a desire to turn its power on others, even to dream of turning it on all. To see the world drown in oceans of agony is the only vision which now brings me any relief from my madness, from a madness which is *not of this world*."

"Though neither is it of any other world," said the mage in the same quiet voice.

"But I have also had visions of butchering the angels," replied the madman, as if to argue the absolute hopelessness of his mania.

"You have envisioned precisely what you believe you have not envisioned. But how could you have known this, when it is the nature of what you have seen—this *anima mundi* of the oldest philosophers and alchemists—to deceive and to pose as the soul of another world, not the soul of the world we

know? There is only one world and one soul of that world, which appears in beauty or in boredom or in madness according to how deeply *anima mundi* has revealed itself to you. It is something which is not there when you look and there again when you look away."

"You speak as if it were a god or demon."

"There is no other or truer way. Like god or demon, it is an assemblage of ourselves though not of ourselves alone. But no further words now," finished the mage.

He then instructed the madman to seat himself at the table of arcane designs and to wait there with eyes calmly closed. And for what remained of that moonless night the mage worked secretly in another part of his house, returning to the wretched dreamer just before dawn. In one of his hands was the product of his labors: a pair of strangely darkened spectacles, as if they had shadows sealed within them.

"Do not open your unhappy eyes, my friend, but listen to my words. I know the visions you have known, for they are the visions I was born to know. There are eyes within our eyes, and when these others open all becomes confusion and horror. The meaning of my long life consists of the endeavor to seize and settle these visions, until my natural eyes themselves have altered in accordance with them. Now, for what reasons I cannot say, *anima mundi* was revealed itself to you in its most savage aspect; which is to say, its secret face. Thus, your life will never again be as you have known it. All the pleasures of the past are now defiled, all your hopes violated beyond hope. There are things which only madmen fear because only madmen may truly conceive of them. Your world is presently black with the scars of madness, but you

must make it blacker still in order to find any soundness or peace. You have seen both too much and not enough. Through the shadow-fogged lenses of these spectacles, you will be blinded so that you may see with greater sight. Through their darkly clouded glass the lesser madness of *anima mundi* will diffuse into the infinite, all-penetrating vision of things in which madness is the sole substance and thereby becomes absent and meaningless for its very ubiquity and absolute meaning. But what would murder another man's mind will bring yours peace, while making you a puppet of peace rather than its prince.

"Henceforth, all things will be in your eyes a distant play of shadows that fretfully strive to impersonate something real, ghosts that clamor to pass themselves as flesh, masks that desperately flit about to conceal the stillness of the void behind them—henceforth, all things will be reduced in your eyes to their inconsequential essence. And all that once shined for you—the steel, the stars, the eyes of another—will lose its luster and take its place among the other shadows. All will be dulled in the power of your vision, which will give you to see that the greatest power, the only power, is to care for nothing."

"Please know that this is the only way I may help you, for my life has taught me that no single soul may be restored where there is no hope of restoring the soul of the world itself. One final word: you must never be without these spectacles or your furies will return to you. There, now you may open your eyes."

Faliol sat very still for some time. At first he did not notice that one of the mage's own eyes was closed, covered by a

sagging eyelid. When at last he saw this and perceived the sacrifice, he said, “And how may I serve you, wise man?”

In the window behind the two seated figures, the dull light of dawn was grappling with the darkness of the past night, with the shadows that seemed almost to be clinging to the window's glass, or were sealed within it.

III: Anima Mundi

While the revelers in the streets of Soldori remedied their discontents by throwing off the everyday face of orthodoxy, those attending the masquerade at the duke's palace found their deliverance by donning other faces, other bodies, and perhaps other souls. The anonymity of that night—no unmasking was expected to be held—enabled a multitude of sins against taste, from the most subtle to the most grotesque indiscretions. The society of the court had transformed itself into a race of gods or monsters, competing at once with the brightest and highest of stars and the strangest of the world's lower creatures. Many would undoubtedly spend the succeeding days or weeks in darkened rooms behind closed doors, so that the effects their disguises had wrought on their bodies might be known to none. For a few rare spirits, this by necessity would be their last appearance in the eyes of the court before a final seclusion. All were quite clearly arrayed as if something unparalleled, and possibly conclusive, was to occur that night. Musicians played in several of the palace's most sumptuous and shimmering halls, glittering glasses were filled by fountains of unnaturally colored wine, and maskers swarmed about like living gargoyles freed from the cathedral's stone. All, or nearly all,

were straining for some unheard of antic, suffering the pleasures of expectancy.

But as the hours passed, hopes dissolved. The duke—in essence a simple man, even a dull one—took no initiative to unloose the abundant possibilities of the masquerade; and, as if secretly aware of these perilous directions, he restrained the efforts of others to pursue them, to digress from the night's steadily unwinding course. No coaxing could sway him: he allowed several odd witticisms to pass unacknowledged, and he feigned that certain dubious suggestions and proposals were obscure to his mind. Unnourished by any source in the duke's own nature, every attempt at innovation curled at its colorful edges and died. The initial strangeness of the masked gathering went stale: voices began to sound as though they were transacting business of some tedious sort, and even the sight of a jester, albeit one with darkness within the eyes of his mask, offered no special merriment to this sullen assembly.

Accompanying the jester, who made no lively movements, was a knight out of armor, dressed in radiant blues and golds, a crusader's cross emblazoned upon his chest, and over his face a white silk mask of blandly noble expression. The odd duo progressed from room to dazzling, crowded room of the palace, as if they were negotiating a thick wood in search of something or someone. The knight appeared nervous, his hand too obviously ready to go for the sword at his side, his head patrolling with skittish alertness the bizarre world around him. The jester, on the other hand, was altogether more composed and methodical, and with excellent reason: he knew, as the knight did not, that their purpose was not a difficult one, especially as they would enjoy

the complicity of Wynge himself, whom the knight had called the Sorcerer and whom the jester addressed as a wise man mage. Had Faliol not been invited to Soldori by a certain messenger who served two masters? And was not Wynge eager to release himself from the unhappy girl who had sought his advice in a certain matter (such innocence he could hardly believe still existed in the world) and who became a pawn in her father and the duke's game? For himself he was unconcerned, but they had also placed the girl's fate in his hands. Once she was out of the scene, these two men, both emulous of a god's glory, would lose the power with which they manipulated the mage, whose retorts and formulas they wanted to provide them with magical riches. Under the present circumstances, the knight might easily regain his beloved, and the jester would finally make good a debt, settling the price he owed for a pair of spectacles.

The two characters paused at the hugely arched entrance to the last, and most intimate, of the masquerade's many rooms. Pulling at the knight's golden sleeve, the jester angled his pointed, sneering muzzle toward a costumed pair in the far corner. These distant figures were impersonating two monarchs of the old days, a king and queen in ancient robes and stoles and many-horned crowns.

“How can you be sure that they are the ones?” whispered the knight to the buffoon at his side.

“Boldly approach and take her hand. You will be sure, but say nothing until you have led yourselves back through these rooms and to freedom.”

“But the Sorcerer,” objected the knight. “He could have us both executed.”

“All is safe. While I engage him as the king's jester, you will make off with the queen. Trust that what I tell is true.”

“I do trust you,” said the knight, as he surreptitiously stuffed a jeweled pouch twice the size of the first into the belt of the jester.

The two characters separated and merged with the murmuring crowd. A few moments later, the jester arrived first at their destination. From a distance he seemed to speak a few words into the king's ear and then suddenly leaped back to play the fool before him, hopping about wildly. The knight bowed before the queen and then without ostentation led her away to other rooms. Although her masked face smothered all expression, the manner in which she placed her hand upon his appeared to reveal her knowledge of the knight's identity. After they had gone, the jester ceased his antics and approached the stern and statue-like king.

“I shall watch the duke's men around us, who may have been watching you, wise man.”

“And I shall see that our two little babes find their way through the forest,” replied the mock-monarch, who abruptly strode off.

But that was not part of your design, thought Faliol. And neither was the pseudo-king's playful voice that of the solemn mage. The dark eyes of the jester's mask followed the movements of the imposter, until he passed through the hugely arched entrance and became lost in the dreamlike throng of the next room. Faliol had just started in pursuit when a strange commotion in another part of the palace swiftly conveyed its anxieties and rumors through all the rooms of the masquerade.

But now that something unheard of had finally occurred, it seemed neither to delight nor relieve any of those same souls who had wished for a unique happening on that carnival night.

The disturbance originated in the centermost room of that labyrinth of rooms composing the arena of the masquerade. To the surrounding as well as the peripheral rooms, including the one in which Faliol was now caught by the crushing crowd, there first travelled sounds of sudden amusement. These were quickly transformed, however, into ambiguous outbursts of surprise, even shock. Finally, the uproar took on the character of intense horror—all voices in alarm and confusion, all movements alarmed and confused. Word passed rapidly, though less and less reliably, from mouth to mouth, room to room. Something terrible had happened, something which had begun, or was initially perceived, as a fabulous hoax. No one knew exactly how it was possible, but there suddenly appeared in the midst of the most populated room some outlandish spectacle: two gruesome figures whose costumes went far beyond anything previously displayed at the masque. Someone said they were most closely akin to giant leeches or worms, for they did not walk upright but writhed along the floor. Another had heard that the creatures possessed countless tiny legs, and thus more properly resembled centipedes of some type. Still others contributed further characteristics—many-taloned claws, reptilian tails, near-human faces—which made up the composition of the fantastic beasts. But whatever may have been the initial reaction to these, presumably artificial, creatures—at some point they inspired the crowd with unreasoning panic. And however the subsequent actions may

have transpired, the consequence was that these bizarre intruders were hacked and torn and trampled beyond recognition by the frenzied, nightmarish gathering.

Tragically, once the massacre was accomplished, it was not the slaughtered remains of two uncanny monsters that the masqueraders—their masks removed—looked down upon. Instead, it was two of their own—a knight and queen of the old days—whose blood was spreading across the intricate designs of the palace floor. Their bodies, once so far from each other, were now all but indistinguishable.

Throwing off his jester's face, Faliol worked himself near enough to the scene to confirm the horror with his own shaded eyes, merely to confirm it. For the image delivered to his mind immediately took its place among the seamless and unending flow of hellish eidola which constituted *anima mundi* and which, in his vision, was a monotonous tapestry of the terrible ceaselessly unfurling itself in the faintest tones of shadowy gray. Thus, the appalling tableau he now witnessed was neither more nor less sinister in his sight than any other which the world might show him.

“Look again, Fa-fa-faliol,” said a voice behind him, as a forceful boot propelled him within inches of the carnage.

But why was everything painted so brilliantly now, when a moment ago it seemed so dull, so unspectacular? Why did every piece of severed flesh quiver with color? And even more vividly than their red-smeared forms did the horrible fates of these unhappy beings affect Faliol's mind and feelings. He had been hired to save them and he could do...nothing. His thoughts were now careening wildly through crimson corridors within him, madly seeking solutions but falling at every turn into blind corners and flailing hopelessly

against something immovable, impossible. He pressed his hands over his face, hoping to blacken the radiant scene. But everything remained invincibly there before his eyes—everything save his spectacles.

Now the duke's voice broke the brief lull of the dazed and incredulous assembly. It shouted orders, demanded answers. It proclaimed the ruler's prophetic misgivings concerning the masquerade and its dangers: he had long known that something of this nature might occur, and had done what he could to prevent its coming to pass. On the spot, he outlawed all future occasions of this kind and called for arrests and interrogations, the Torture of the Question to be liberally implemented. Exodus was instantaneous—the palace became a chaos of fleeing freaks.

"Faliol!" called a voice that sounded too clear, within all the confusion, to have its origin outside his own mind. "I have what you're looking for. They're with me now, right here in my hand, not lost forever."

When Faliol turned around, he saw the masked king standing some distance away, unmolested by the frantic mob. The king's hand was holding out the spectacles, as if they were the dangling head of a conquered foe. Fighting his way toward the unknown persecutor, Faliol continued to remain several steps behind him as he was led by this demon through all the rooms where the masquerade once flourished, and then deeper into the palace. At the end of a long silent corridor, the gaudy, flapping train of a royal robe disappeared into a doorway. Faliol followed the fluttering bait and at last entered a dim chamber with a single window, before which stood the mummer in a sparkling silk mask. The spectacles were still held by the velvet fingers of a tightly

gloved hand. Watching as the dark lenses flashed in the candlelight, Faliol's eyes burned as much with questions as with madness.

"Where is the mage?" he demanded.

"The mage is no more. Quickly, what else?"

"Who are you?"

"Wasted question, you know who I am. What else?"

"What are you?"

"Another one like the other. Say I'm a sorcerer, very well?"

"And you killed the mage as you did the others."

"The others? How could you have not heard that rattling pantomime, all those swords and swift feet? Didn't you hear that there was a pair of leviathan leeches, or something in that way, menacing the guests? True, I had a hand in the illusion, but *my* hand contained no gouging blade. A shambles, you saw it with your own eyes."

"In their fate you saw your own future. Even a sorcerer may be killed."

"Agreed, even a sorcerer with three eyes, or two eyes, or one."

"Who are you to have destroyed the mage?"

"In fact, he destroyed himself—an heroic act, I'm sure—some days ago. And he did it before *my* own eyes, as if in spite. As for myself, I confess that I'm disappointed to be so far beneath your recognition. We have met previously, please remember. But it was many years past, and I suppose you became forgetful as well as dim-sighted once you put those pieces of glass over your eyes. You see why the mage had to be stopped. He ruined you as a madman, as *my* madman.

“But you might recall that you had another career before the madness took you, did you not? Buh-buh-brave Faliol. Don't you remember how you were made that way? Don't you wish to remember that you were Faliol the dandy before we met on the road that day? It was I—in my role as a charmseller—who outfitted you with that onyx-eyed amulet which you once wore around your neck, and which made you the skillful mercenary you once were. That you loved to be.

“And how everyone else loved you that way: to see a weakling transformed into a man of strength and of steel is the stuff of public comment, of legend, of the crowd's *amusement*. And how much more do they love to witness the reverse of this magical process: to see the mighty laid low, the lord of the sword made mad. This was the little drama I had planned. You were supposed to be my madman, Faliol, not the placid fool of that magician—a real lost soul of torments in red and black, not a pathetic monk chanting silent psalms in pale breaths. Don't you understand? It was that Wynge, or whatever his name was, who ruined you, who undid all my schemes for your tragic and colorful history. Because of him I had to change my plans and chase you down to this place. Blame him, if anyone, for the slaughter of those innocents and for what you are about to suffer. You know my ways, we are not strangers.”

“No, demon horror, we are not. You are indeed the foul thing the wise man described to me, all the dark powers which we cannot understand but can only hate.”

“Powers? At least the magician spoke of me as a being, albeit a type of god or demon. But I might even be regarded as a person of sorts, someone who is just like everybody else,

but not quite like anyone. I honor him for his precise vision, as far as it went. But you're wrong to contend that no one understands me; and as for hating the one who stands before you—nothing, in truth, could be farther from truth. Listen, do you hear those brawling voices in the streets beyond the window. Those are not voices filled with hate. In fact, they could not possibly hold a greater love for me. And reciprocally I love them, every one of them: all I do is for them. Did you think that my business was the exceptional destinies of heroes and magicians, of kings and queens, saints and sinners, of all the so-called great? Such extravagant freaks come and go, they are puppets who dance before the eternal eyes of my true children. Only in these multitudes do I live, and through their eyes I see my own glory."

"You see but your own foulness."

"No, the foulness is yours alone to see, Faliol. You see something that, for them, truly does not exist. This is a privileged doom reserved for creatures such as yourself. A type of consolation."

"You have said enough."

"Liar! You know that you wish my speech to go on, because you fear what will happen when I stop speaking. But I haven't said what I came here to say, or rather to ask. You know the question, don't deny it, Faliol. The one you dreamed in those dreams that were not dreams. The torture of the question you dreaded to hear asked, and dreaded more to have answered."

"Demon!"

"*What is the face of the soul of the world?*"

"No, it is not a face… it is only—"

“Yes, Faliol, it is *this* face,” said the masked figure as it peeled away its mask. “But why have you hidden your eyes that way, Faliol? And why have you fallen to your knees? Don't you appreciate the vision I've shown you? Could you ever have imagined that your life would lead you into the presence of such a sight? Your spectacles cannot save you now, now that you have seen. They are only so much glinting glass—there, listen to how they crunch into smaller and smaller fragments upon the fine, cool marble of the floor. No more spectacles, no more magic, no more magician. And I think, too, no more Faliol. Can you understand what I'm telling you now, jester? Well, what have you got say? Nothing? How black your madness must be to make you so rude a buffoon. How black. But see, even though you cannot, how I've provided these escorts to show you the way back to the carnival, which is where a fool belongs. And be sure that you make my favorite little children laugh, or I will punish you. Yes, I can still punish you, Faliol. A living man can always be punished, so remember to be good. I will be watching. I am always watching. Farewell, then, fool.”

A glazen-eyed guard on either side of him, Faliol was dragged from the duke's palace and given to the crowd which still rioted in the streets of Soldori. And the crowd embraced the mad, sightless jester, hoisting his jingling form upon their shoulders and shaking him like a toy as they carried him along. In its scheme to strangle silence forever, Soldori's unruled populus bellowed a robust refrain to Faliol's sickly moans. And his blind eyes gazed up at an onyx-black night which they could not see, which his vanished mind could no longer comprehend.

But there must have been some moment, however brief, in which Faliol regained his old enlightenment and which allowed him to accomplish such a crucial and triumphant action. Was it solely by his own sleeping strength, fleetingly aroused, that he attained his greatest prize? If not, then what power could have enabled his trembling hands to reach so deeply into those haggard sockets, and with a gesture brave and sure dig out the awful seeds of his suffering? However it was done, the deed was done well. For as Faliol perished his face was flushed with a crimson glory.

And the crowd fell silent, and a new kind of confusion spread among them—those heads which were always watching—when it was found that what they were bearing through the streets of Soldori was only Faliol's victorious corpse.

The Prodigy Of Dreams (2011 Noctuary Version)

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> I conceived my ideal leave-taking from this earth—a drama prepared by strange portents, swiftly developed by dreams and visions nurtured in an atmosphere of sublime dread, growing overnight like some gaudy fungus in a forgotten cellar...
>
> —*The Travel Diaries of Arthur Emerson*

It seemed to Arthur Emerson that the swans, those perennial guests of the estate, had somehow become strange. Granted, his knowledge of their natural behavior was vague, providing him with little idea of precisely how they had departed from habit or instinct. But he strongly sensed that there had indeed been such a departure, an imperceptible drifting into the peculiar. Suddenly these creatures, which had become as tedious to him as everything else, filled him with an astonishment he had not known in many years.

That morning they were gathered at the center of the lake, barely visible within a milky haze which hovered above still waters. For as long as he observed them, they did not allow themselves the slightest motion toward the grassy shores circling the lake. Each of them—there were four—

faced a separate direction, as though some antagonism existed within their order. Then their sleek, ghostly forms revolved with a mechanical ease and came to huddle around an imaginary point of focus. For a moment their heads nodded slightly toward one another, bowing in wordless prayer. But soon they stretched their snaking necks in unison, elevated their orange and black bills toward the thick mist above, and gazed into its depths. There followed a series of haunting cries unlike anything ever heard on the vast grounds of that isolated estate.

Arthur Emerson now wondered if something he could not see was disturbing the swans. As he stood at the tall windows which faced the lake, he made a mental note to have Graff go down there and find out what he could. Possibly some unwelcome animal was now living in the dense woods nearby. And as he further considered the matter, it appeared that the numerous wild ducks, those brownish goblins that were always either visible or audible somewhere in the vicinity of the lake, had already vacated the area. Or perhaps they were only obscured by the unusually heavy mist of that singular morning.

Arthur Emerson spent the rest of the day in the library. At intervals he was visited by a black cat, an aloof and somewhat phantasmal member of the small Emerson household. Eventually it fell asleep on a sunny window ledge, while its master wandered among the countless, uncatalogued volumes he had accumulated over the past fifty years or so.

During his childhood, the collection which filled the library's dark shelves was a common one, and much of it he had given away or destroyed in order to provide room for other works. He was the only scholar in a lengthy succession

of businessmen of one kind or another, the last living member of the old family. At his death, the estate would probably pass into the hands of a distant relative whose name and face he did not know. But this was not of any great concern to Arthur Emerson: resignation to his own inconsequence, along with that of all things of the earth, was a philosophy he had nurtured for some time, and with considerable success.

In his younger years he had traveled a great deal, these excursions often relating to his studies, which could be approximately described as ethnological bordering on the esoteric. Throughout various quarters of what now seemed to him a shrunken, almost claustrophobic world, he had attempted to satisfy an inborn craving to comprehend what then seemed to him an astonishing, even shocking existence. Arthur Emerson recalled that while still a child the world around him suggested strange expanses not subject to common view. This sense of the invisible often exerted itself in moments when he witnessed nothing more than a patch of pink sky above leafless trees in twilight or an abandoned room where dust settled on old portraits and massive furniture. To him, however, these appearances disguised realms of an entirely different nature. For within these imagined or divined spheres there existed a kind of confusion—a swirling, fluttering motion that was belied by the relative order of the seen.

Only on rare occasions could he enter these unseen spaces, and always unexpectedly. A striking experience of this nature took place in his childhood years and involved a previous generation of swans which he had paused one summer afternoon to contemplate from a knoll by the lake. Perhaps their drifting and gliding upon the water had induced

in him something like a hypnotic state. The ultimate effect, however, was not the serene catatonia of hypnosis, but a whirling flight through a glittering threshold which opened within the air itself, propelling him into a kaleidoscopic universe where space consisted only of multi-colored and ever-changing currents, as of wind or water, and where time did not exist.

Later he became a student of the imaginary lands hypothesized by legends and theologies, and he had sojourned in places which concealed or suggested unknown orders of existence. Included in his library were several works of his own authorship, bibliographical shadows of his lifetime obsessions. Among these were such titles as: *In the Margins of Paradise*, *The Forgotten Universe of the* Vicoli, and *The Secret Gods and Other Studies*. For many feverish years he was burdened with the sensation, an ancient one to be sure, that the incredible sprawl of human history was no more than a pathetically partial record of an infinitely vast and shadowed chronicle of universal metamorphoses. How much greater, then, was the feeling that his own pathetic history formed a practically invisible fragment of what itself was merely an obscure splinter of the infinite. Somehow he needed to liberate himself from the dungeon cell of his life. In the end, however, he broke beneath the weight of his aspiration. And as the years passed, the only mystery which seemed worthy of his interest, and his amazement, was that unknown day which would inaugurate his personal eternity, that incredible day on which the sun simply would not rise, and forever would begin.

Arthur Emerson pulled a rather large book down from its high shelf and ambled toward a cluttered desk to make some

notes for a work which would very likely be his last. Its tentative title: *Dynasties of Dust*.

Toward nightfall he suspended his labors. Stiffened by inactivity, he made his way to the window ledge where the cat lay sleeping in the fading light of dusk. But its body seemed to rise and fall a little too vigorously for sleep, and it made a strange whistling sound rather than its usual murmuring purr. The cat opened its eyes and rolled sideways, as it often did when inviting a hand to stroke its glossy black fur. But as soon as Arthur Emerson laid his palm upon that smooth coat, his fingers were rapidly gnawed. The animal then leaped to the floor and ran out of the room, while Arthur Emerson watched his own blood trickling over his hand in a shapeless stain.

All that evening he felt restless, profoundly at odds with the atmosphere of each room he entered and then soon abandoned. He wandered the house, telling himself that he was in search of his ebony pet, in order to establish the terms of their misunderstanding. But this pretext would every so often dissolve, and it then became clear to Arthur Emerson that he searched for something less tangible than a runaway cat. These rooms, however high their ceilings, suffocated him with shadowy questions; his footsteps, echoing sharply down long gleaming corridors, sounded like clacking bones. The house had become a museum of mystery.

He finally gave up the hunt and allowed fatigue to guide him to his bedroom, where immediately he opened a window in the hope that something without a name would fly from the house. But he now discovered that it was not only the house which was swollen with mysteries; it was the very night itself. A nocturnal breeze began lifting the curtains,

mingling with the air inside the room. Shapeless clumps of clouds floated with mechanical complacency across a stone gray sky, a sky which itself seemed shapeless rather than evenly infinite. To his left he saw that the inner surface of the open window reflected a strange face, his face, and he pushed the fear-stricken thing out into the darkness.

With difficulty, Arthur Emerson fell asleep that night, and as he slept he dreamed. His dreams were without definite form, a realm of mist where twisted shadows glided, their dark mass shifting fluently. Then, through the queerly gathered and drifting clouds of mist, he saw a shadow whose dark monstrosity made the others seem shapely and radiant. It was a deformed colossus, a disfigured monument carved from the absolute density of the blackest abyss. And now the lesser shadows, the pale and meager shadows, seemed to join in a squealing chorus of praise to the greater one. He gazed at the cyclopean thing in a trance of horror, until its mountainous mass began to move, slowly stretching out some part of itself, flexing what might have been a misshapen arm. And when he awoke, scattering the bedcovers, he felt a warm breeze wafting in through a window which he could not remember having left open.

The next morning it became apparent that there would be no relief from the uncanny influences which still seemed to be lingering from the day before. All about the Emerson estate a terrific fog had formed, blinding the inhabitants of the house to most of the world beyond it. What few shapes remained visible—the closest and darkest trees, some rose bushes pressing against the windows—seemed drained of all earthly substance, creating a landscape both infinite and imprisoning, an estate of dreams. Unseen in the fog, the swans

were calling out like banshees down by the lake. And even Graff, when he appeared in the library attired in a bulky groundskeeper's jacket and soiled trousers, looked less like a man than a specter of ill prophecy.

"Are you certain," said Arthur Emerson, who was seated at his desk, "that you have nothing to report about those creatures?"

"No, sir," replied Graff. "Nothing."

There was, however, something else Graff had discovered, something which he thought the master of the house should see for himself. Together they traveled down several stairways leading to the various cellars and storage chambers beneath the house. On the way Graff explained that, as also ordered, he had searched for the cat, which had not been seen since last evening. Arthur Emerson only gazed at his man and nodded in silence, while inwardly muttering to himself about some strangeness he perceived in the old retainer. Between every few phrases the man would begin humming, or rather singing at the back of his throat in an entirely peculiar manner.

After making their way far into the dark catacombs of the Emerson house, they arrived at a remote room which seemed to have been left unfinished when the house was erected so long ago. There were no lighting fixtures (except the one recently improvised by Graff), the stone walls were unplastered and unpainted, and the floor was of hard, bare earth. Graff pointed downward, and his crooked finger wandered in an arc through the sepulchral dimness of the room. Arthur Emerson now saw that the place had been turned into a charnel house for the remains of small animals: mice, rats, birds, squirrels, even a few young possums

and raccoons. He already knew the cat to be an obsessive hunter, but it seemed strange that these carcasses had all been brought to this room, as if it were a kind of sanctum of mutilation and death.

While contemplating this macabre chamber, Arthur Emerson noticed peripherally that Graff was fidgeting with some object concealed in his pocket. How strange indeed the old servant had become.

“What have you got there?” Arthur Emerson asked.

“Sir?” Graff replied, as though his manual gyrations had proceeded without his awareness. “Oh, this,” he said, revealing a metal gardening implement with four claw-like prongs. “I was doing some work outdoors; that is, I was intending to do so, if there was time.”

“Time? On a day like this?”

Obviously embarrassed and at a loss to explain himself, Graff pointed the talons of the tool at the decomposing carcasses. “None of the animals actually seem to have been eaten,” he quietly observed, and that curious piping in his throat sounded almost louder than his words.

“No,” Arthur Emerson agreed with some bewilderment. He then reached up to grasp a thick black extension cord which Graff had slung over the rafters. At the end of the cord was a light bulb which he tried to maneuver to more fully illuminate the room. Incautiously, perhaps, Arthur Emerson was thinking that there existed some method to the way the bodies of the slaughtered creatures were positioned across the entire floor. Graff's next remark approximated the unformed perception of his employer: “Like a trail of dominos winding round and round. But no true sense to it.”

Arthur Emerson readily granted the apt analogy to a maze of dominos, but concerning the second of Graff's statements there suddenly appeared to be some doubt. For at that moment Arthur Emerson looked up and saw a queerly shaped stain, as if made by mold or moisture, upon the far wall.

"Shall I clean the place out?" asked Graff, raising the metal claw.

"What? No," decided Arthur Emerson as he gazed at the shapeless, groping horror that appeared to have crawled from his own dream and stained itself into the stone before him. "Leave everything exactly as it is," he ordered the old whistling servant.

Arthur Emerson returned to the library and began to explore a certain shelf of books. Collected there were his private archives of handsomely bound travel diaries he had kept over the years. He withdrew one after another, paged through each volume, and then replaced it. Finally he found the one he wanted, which was the record of a visit to central and southern Italy made when he was a young man. Settling down at his desk, he leaned into the words before him. After reading only a few sentences he began to wonder who this strange, lyrical creature, this ghost, might be. No doubt himself, but in some previous incarnation, some bizarre anterior life. The section of the book he read was titled:

Spoleto (Ides of October)

What wonders dwell within the vicoli! How often can I celebrate those fabulous little thoroughfares which form a maze of magic and dreams? And how often can I praise the medieval hill towns of Umbria which are woven of such

streets? Guiding one into courtyards, they are snug roads invented for the meanderings of sleepwalkers. One is embraced by the gray walls of high houses, one is nestled beneath their wood-beamed roofs and beneath innumerable arches which cut the monotonous day into a wealth of shadows and frame the stars at night within random curves and angles. Nightfall in the vicoli! Pale, yellow lanterns awake like apparitions in the last moments of twilight, claiming the dark narrow lanes for their own, granting an enchanted but somewhat uneasy passage to those who would walk there. And last evening I found myself among these spirits.

Intoxicated as much by the Via Porta Fuga as by the wine I had drunk at dinner, I wandered across bridges, beneath arches and overhanging roofs, up and down battered stairways, past ivy-hung walls and black windows masked with iron grillwork. I turned a corner and glimpsed a small open doorway ahead. Without thinking, I looked inside as I passed, seeing only a tiny niche, not even a room, which must have been constructed in the space between two buildings. All I could clearly discern were two small candles which were the source and focus of a confusion of shadows. From inside a man's voice spoke to me in English: “A survival of the ancient world,” said the voice, which carried the accent of a cultivated Englishman, one who sounded very bored and mechanistic, not to mention out of place under the circumstances. And I also must note a strange whistling quality in his words, as if his naturally low speaking voice were resonating with faintly high-pitched overtones. “Yes, sir, I am speaking to you,” he continued. “A fragment of antiquity, a survival of the ancient world. Nothing to fear, there is no fee demanded.”

He now appeared in the doorway, a balding and flabby middle-aged gentleman in a tattered, tieless suit—the image of his own weary voice, the voice of an exhausted fairgrounds huckster. His face, as it reflected the pale yellow light of the lantern beside the open doorway, was tranquil; but its tranquility seemed to derive from a total despair of soul rather than from a serenity of mind.

"I am referring to the altar of the god," he said. "However extensive your learning and your travels, that one is not amongst those deities you will have heard about; that one is not among those divinities you may have laughed about. It could be distantly related, perhaps, to those numina of Roman cesspools and sewage systems. But it is not a mere Cloacina, not a Mephitis or Robigo. In name, the god is known as Cynothoglys: the god without shape, the god of changes and confusion, the god of decompositions, the mortician god of both gods and men, the meta-mortician of all things. There is no fee demanded."

I remained where I stood, and then the man stepped out into the little vicolo in order to allow me a better view through the open doorway, into the candlelit room beyond. I could now see that the candles were shining on either side of a low slab, slim candles that sent out a quivering haze of smoke. Between these tapers was an object which I could not define, some poor shapeless thing, perhaps the molten relic of a volcanic eruption at some distant time, but certainly not the image of an ancient deity. There seemed to be nothing and no one else inhabiting that sinister little nook.

I may now contend that, given the unusual circumstances described above, the wisest course of action would have been to mumble a few polite excuses and move on. But I have also

described the spell which is cast by the vicoli, by their dimly glowing and twisted depths. Entranced by these dreamlike surroundings, I was thus prepared to accept the strange gentleman's offer, if only to enhance my feeling of intoxication again with all the formless mysteries whose name was now Cynothoglys.

"But be solemn, sir. I warn you to be solemn."

I stared at the man for a brief moment, and in that moment this urging of solemnity seemed connected in some way to his present slavish and impoverished state, which I found it difficult to believe had always been his condition. "The god will not mock your devotions, your prayers," he whispered and whistled. "Nor will it be mocked."

Then, stepping through the little doorway, I approached the primitive altar. Occupying its center was a dark, monolithic object whose twisting shapelessness placed it beyond simple analogies in my imagination. Yet there was something in its contours—a certain dynamism, like that of great crablike roots springing forth from the ground—which suggested more than mere chaos or random creation. Perhaps the following statement could be more sensibly attributed to the mood of the moment, but there seemed a definite power somehow linked to this gnarled effigy, a gloomy force which was disguised by its monumentally static appearance. Toward the summit of the mutilated sculpture, a crooked armlike appendage extended outward in a frozen grasp, as if it had held this position for unknown eons and at any time might resume, and conclude, its movement.

I drew closer to the contorted idol, remaining in its presence far longer than I intended. That I actually found myself mentally composing a kind of supplication tells more than I

am presently able about my psychological and spiritual state last evening. Was it this beast of writhing stone or the spell of the vicoli which inspired my prayer and determined its form? It was, I think, something which they shared, a suggestion of great things: great secrets and great sorrows, great wonders and catastrophes, great destinies, great doom, and a single great death. My own. Drugged by this inspiration, I conceived my ideal leave-taking from this earth—a drama prepared by strange portents, swiftly developed by dreams and visions nurtured in an atmosphere of sublime dread, growing overnight like some gaudy fungus in a forgotten cellar, and always with the awful hand of the mortician god working the machinery behind the scenes. Beasts and men would form an alliance with great Cynothoglys, the elements themselves would enter into the conspiracy, a muted vortex of strange forces all culminating in a spectral denouement, all converging to deliver me to the inevitable, but deliver me in a manner worthy of the most expansive and unearthly sensations of my life. I conceived the primal salvation of tearing flesh, of seizure by the god and the ecstatic rending of the frail envelope of skin and sinew. And as others only sink into their deaths—into mine I would soar.

But how could I have desired this to be, I now wonder, fully sober following my debauch of dreams. Perhaps I am too repentant of my prayer and try to reassure myself by my very inability to give it a rational place in the history of the universe. The mere memory of my adventure and my delirium, I expect, will serve to carry me through many of the barren days ahead, though only to abandon me in the end to a pathetic demise of meaningless pain. By then I may have forgotten the god I encountered, along with the one who

served him like a slave. Both seem to have disappeared from the vicoli, their temple standing empty and abandoned. And now I am free to imagine that it was not I who came to the vicoli to meet the god, but the god who came to meet me.

After reading these old words, Arthur Emerson sat silent and solemn at his desk. Was it over for him, then? All the portents had appeared and all the functionaries of his doom were now assembled, both outside the library door—where the footfall of man and beast sounded—and beyond the library windows, where a horrible thing without shape had begun to loom out of the fog, reaching through the walls and windows as if they too were merely mist. Were a thousand thoughts of outrage and dread now supposed to rise within him at the prospect of this occult extermination? After all, he was about to have forced upon him that dream of death, that whim of some young adventurer who could not resist being granted a wish or two by a tourist attraction.

And now the crying of the swans had begun to sound from the lake and through the fog and into the house. Their shrieks were echoing everywhere, and he might have predicted as much. Would he soon be required to add his own shrieks to theirs? Was it now time to be overcome by the wonder of the unknown and the majesty of fate? Was this how it was *done* in the world of doom? He thought of the dead animals in the basement, their carcasses coiled like the byways of the vicoli where he prayed for the ritual that would precede his demise. It all made sense now.

Risking an accusation of bad manners, Arthur Emerson failed to rise from his chair to greet the guest he had invited so long ago. “You are too late,” he said in a dry voice. “But

since you have taken the trouble…” And the god, like some obedient slave, descended upon its supplicant.

It was only at the very end that Arthur Emerson's attitude of incuriosity abandoned him. As he had guessed, perhaps even wished, his voice indeed became confused with the screaming of the swans, soaring high into the muffling fog.

The Prodigy Of Dreams (1994 Noctuary Version)

First published in All *The Devils Are Here*, 1986

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>
> —*The Travel Diaries of Arthur Emerson*

It seemed to Arthur Emerson that the swans, those perennial guests of the estate, had somehow become strange. Yet his knowledge of their natural behavior was vague, providing him with little idea of precisely how they had departed from habit or instinct. But he strongly sensed that there had indeed been such a departure, an imperceptible drifting into the peculiar. Suddenly these creatures, which had become as tedious to him as everything else, filled him with an astonishment he had not known in many years.

That morning they were gathered at the center of the lake, barely visible within a milky haze which hovered above still waters. For as long as he observed them, they did not allow themselves the slightest motion toward the grassy shores circling the lake. Each of them—there were four—faced a separate direction, as though some antagonism exis-

ted within their order. Then their sleek, ghostly forms revolved with a mechanical ease and came to huddle around an imaginary point of focus. For a moment their heads nodded slightly toward one another, bowing in wordless prayer; but soon they stretched their snaking necks in unison, elevated their orange and black bills toward the thick mist above, and gazed into its depths. There followed a series of haunting cries unlike anything ever heard on the vast grounds of that isolated estate.

Arthur Emerson now wondered if something he could not see was disturbing the swans. As he stood at the tall windows which faced the lake, he made a mental note to have Graff go down there and find out what he could. Possibly some unwelcome animal was now living in the dense woods nearby. And as he further considered the matter, it appeared that the numerous wild ducks, those brownish goblins that were always either visible or audible somewhere in the vicinity of the lake, had already vacated the area. Or perhaps they were only obscured by the unusually heavy mist of that singular morning.

Arthur Emerson spent the rest of the day in the library. At intervals he was visited by a very black cat, an aloof and somewhat phantasmal member of the small Emerson household. Eventually it fell asleep on a sunny window ledge, while its master wandered among the countless uncatalogued volumes he had accumulated over the past fifty years or so.

During his childhood, the collection which filled the library's dark shelves was a common one, and much of it he had given away or destroyed in order to provide room for other works. He was the only scholar in a lengthy succession

of businessmen of one kind or another, the last living member of the old family; at his death, the estate would probably pass into the hands of a distant relative whose name and face he did not know. But this was not of any great concern to Arthur Emerson: resignation to his own inconsequence, along with that of all things of the earth, was a philosophy he had nurtured for some time, and with considerable success.

In his younger years he had travelled a great deal, these excursions often relating to his studies, which could be approximately described as ethnological bordering on the esoteric. Throughout various quarters of what now seemed to him a shrunken, almost claustrophobic world, he had attempted to satisfy an inborn craving to comprehend what *then* seemed to him an astonishing, even shocking existence. Arthur Emerson recalled that while still a child the world around him suggested strange expanses not subject to common view. This sense of the invisible often exerted itself in moments when he witnessed nothing more than a patch of pink sky above leafless trees in twilight or an abandoned room where dust settled on portraits and old furniture. To him, however, these appearances disguised realms of an entirely different nature. For within these imagined or divined spheres there existed a certain… confusion, a swirling, fluttering motion that was belied by the relative order of the seen.

Only on rare occasions could he enter these unseen spaces, and always unexpectedly. A striking experience of this kind took place in his childhood years and involved a previous generation of swans which he had paused one summer afternoon to contemplate from a knoll by the lake. Perhaps their smooth drifting and gliding upon the water had

induced in him something like a hypnotic state. The ultimate effect, however, was not the serene catatonia of hypnosis, but a whirling flight through a glittering threshold which opened within the air itself, propelling him into a kaleidoscopic universe where space consisted only of multicolored and ever-changing currents, as of wind or water, and where time did not exist.

Later he became a student of the imaginary lands hypothesized by legends and theologies, and he had sojourned in places which concealed or suggested unknown orders of existence. Among the volumes in his library were several of his own authorship, bibliographical shadows of his lifetime obsessions. His body of works included such titles as: *In the Margins of Paradise*, *The Forgotten Universe of the Vicoli*, and *The Secret Gods and Other Studies*. For many feverish years he was burdened with the sensation, an ancient one to be sure, that the incredible sprawl of human history was no more than a pathetically partial record of an infinitely vast and shadowed chronicle of universal metamorphoses. How much greater, then, was the feeling that his own pathetic history formed a practically invisible fragment of what itself was merely an obscure splinter of the infinite. Somehow he needed to excarcerate himself from the claustral dungeon cell of his life. In the end, however, he broke beneath the weight of his aspiration. And as the years passed, the only mystery which seemed worthy of his interest, and his amazement, was that unknown day which would inaugurate his personal eternity, that incredible day on which the sun simply would not rise, and forever would begin.

Arthur Emerson pulled a rather large book down from its high shelf and ambled toward a cluttered desk to make some

notes for a work which would very likely be his last. Its tentative title: *Dynasties of Dust*.

Toward nightfall he suspended his labors. With much stiffness, he walked to the window ledge where the cat lay sleeping in the fading light of dusk. But its body seemed to rise and fall a little too vigorously for sleep, and it made a strange whistling sound rather than the usual murmuring purr. The cat opened its eyes and rolled sideways, as it often did when inviting a hand to stroke its glossy black fur. But as soon as Arthur Emerson laid his palm upon that smooth coat, his fingers were rapidly gnawed. The animal then leaped to the floor and ran out of the room, while Arthur Emerson watched his own blood trickling over his hand in a shapeless stain.

All that evening he felt restless, profoundly at odds with the atmosphere of each room he entered and then soon abandoned. He wandered the house, telling himself that he was in search of his ebony pet, in order to establish the terms of their misunderstanding. But this pretext would every so often dissolve, and it then became clear to Arthur Emerson that he searched for something less tangible than a runaway cat.

These rooms, however high their ceilings, suffocated him with shadowy questions; his footsteps, echoing sharply down long gleaming corridors, sounded like clacking bones. The house had become a museum of mystery.

He finally gave up the search and allowed fatigue to guide him to his bedroom, where immediately he opened a window in the hope that something without a name would fly from the house. But he now discovered that it was not only the house which was swollen with mysteries; it was the very

night itself. A nocturnal breeze began lifting the curtains, mingling with the air inside the room. Shapeless clumps of clouds floated with mechanical complacency across a stone gray sky, a sky which itself seemed shapeless rather than evenly infinite. To his left he saw that the inner surface of the open window reflected a strange face, his face, and he pushed the fear-stricken thing out into the darkness.

Arthur Emerson eventually slept that night, but he also dreamed. His dreams were without definite form, a realm of mist where twisted shadows glided, their dark mass shifting fluently. Then, through the queerly gathered and drifting clouds of mist, he saw a shadow whose dark monstrosity made the others seem shapely and radiant. It was a deformed colossus, a disfigured monument carved from the absolute density of the blackest abyss. And now the lesser shadows, the pale and meager shadows, seemed to join in a squealing chorus of praise to the greater one. He gazed at the cyclopean thing in a trance of horror, until its mountainous mass began to move, slowly stretching out some part of itself, flexing what might have been a misshapen arm. And when he awoke, scattering the bedcovers, he felt a warm breeze wafting in through a window which he could not remember having left open.

The next morning it became apparent that there would be no relief from the uncanny influences which still seemed to be lingering from the day before. All about the Emerson estate a terrific fog had formed, blinding the inhabitants of the house to most of the world beyond it. What few shapes remained visible—the closest and darkest trees, some rose bushes pressing against the windows—seemed drained of all earthly substance, creating a landscape both infinite and im-

prisoning, an estate of dream. Unseen in the fog, the swans were calling out like banshees down by the lake. And even Graff, when he appeared in the library attired in a bulky groundskeeper's jacket and soiled trousers, looked less like a man than like a specter of ill prophecy.

“Are you certain,” said Arthur Emerson, who was seated at his, desk, “that you have nothing to report about those creatures?”

“No sir,” replied Graff. “Nothing.”

There was, however, something else Graff had discovered, something which he thought the master of the house should see for himself. Together they travelled down several stairways leading to the various cellars and storage chambers beneath the house. On the way Graff explained that, as also ordered, he had searched for the cat, which had not been seen since last evening. Arthur Emerson only gazed at his man and nodded in silence, while inwardly muttering to himself about some strangeness he perceived in the old retainer. Between every few phrases the man would begin humming, or rather singing at the back of his throat in an entirely peculiar manner.

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"Time? On a day like this?"

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And now the crying of the swans had begun to sound from the lake and through the fog and into the house. Their shrieks were echoing everywhere, and he might have predicted as much. Would he soon be required to add his own shrieks to theirs, was it now time to be overcome by the wonder of the unknown and the majesty of fate; was this how it was *done* in the world of doom?

Risking an accusation of bad manners, Arthur Emerson failed to rise from his chair to greet the guest he had invited so long ago. “You are too late,” he said in a dry voice. “But since you have taken the trouble…” And the god, like some obedient slave, descended upon its victim.

It was only at the very end that Arthur Emerson's attitude of incuriosity abandoned him. As he had guessed, perhaps even wished, his voice indeed became confused with the screaming of the swans, soaring high into the muffling fog.

Dr. Locrian's Asylum (2010 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

First published in *Grue Magazine* #5, 1987

Years passed and no one in our town, no one I could name, allotted a single word to that great ruin which marred the evenness of the horizon. Nor was mention made of the gated patch of ground closer to the town's edge. Even in days more remote, few things were said about these sites. Perhaps someone would propose tearing down the old asylum and razing the burial ground where no inmate had been interred for a generation or more; and perhaps a few others, swept along by the moment, would nod their heart's assent. But the resolution always remained poorly formed, very soon losing its shape entirely, its impetus dying a gentle death in the gentle old streets of our town.

Then how can I explain that sudden turn of events, that overnight conversion which set our steps toward that hulking and decayed structure, trampling its burial ground along the way? In answer, I put forward the existence of a secret movement, one conducted in the souls of the town's citizens, and in their dreams. Conceived thus, the mysterious conversion loses some of its mystery. One need only accept that we were all haunted by the same revenant, that certain images began to establish themselves deep within each of us and be-

came part of our hidden lives. Finally, we resolved that we could no longer live as we had been.

When the idea of taking action first arose, the residents of the humble west end of town were the most zealous and impatient. For it was they who had suffered the severest unease, living as they did in close view of the wild plots and crooked headstones of that crowded strip of earth where mad minds had come to be shut away for eternity. But all of us were equally burdened by the asylum itself, which seemed to be visible from every corner of town—from the high rooms of the old hotel, from the quiet rooms of our houses, from streets obscured by morning mist or twilight haze, and from my own shop whenever I looked out its front window. To make things worse, the setting sun would each day slip out of sight behind the asylum, thus committing our town to a premature darkness in the long shadow of that massive edifice.

Yet more disturbing than our view of the asylum was the idiotic gaze that it seemed to cast back at us. Throughout the years, some persons actually claimed to have seen mad-eyed and immobile figures staring out from the asylum's windows on nights when the moon shone with unusual brightness and the sky appeared to contain more than its usual share of stars. Though few people spoke of such experiences, almost everyone had seen other sights at the asylum that no one could deny. And what strange things were brought to mind because of them; all over town vague scenes were inwardly envisioned.

As children, most of us had paid a visit at some time to that forbidden place, and later we carried with us memories of our somber adventures. Over time we came to compare

what we experienced, compiling this knowledge of the asylum until it became unseemly to augment it further.

By all accounts that old institution was a chamber of horrors, if not in its entirety then at least in certain isolated corners. It was not simply that a particular room attracted notice for its atmosphere of desolation: gray walls pocked like sponges, the floor filthied by the years entering freely through broken windows, and a shallow bed sunken after supporting so many nights of futile tears and screaming. There was something more.

Perhaps one of the walls to such a room would have built into it a sliding panel that could be opened only from the other side. And next to that room would be another room that was unfurnished and seemed never to have been occupied. But leaning against one wall of this other room, directly below the sliding panel, would be some long wooden sticks; and mounted at the ends of these sticks would be horrible little puppets.

Another room might be completely bare, yet its walls would be covered with pale fragments of weird funereal scenes. By removing some loose floorboards at the center of the room, one would discover several feet of earth piled upon an old, empty coffin.

Then there was a very special room—a room I had visited myself—that was located on the uppermost floor of the asylum. In the ceiling of that room was a great skylight. And positioned under that opening upon the heavens, fixed securely in place, there stood a long table with thick straps hanging from its sides.

Other rooms of a strange type have been struck from my memory, though I know they existed and may have dreamed

of them. But none of these was singled out for comment during the actual dismantling of the asylum, when most of us were busy heaving the debris of decades through great breaches we had made in the building's outer walls, while some distance away the rest of the town witnessed the wrecking in a state of watchful silence. Among this group was Mr. Harkness Locrian, a thin and large-eyed old gentleman whose silence was not like that of the others.

Perhaps we expected Mr. Locrian to voice opposition to our project, but he did not do so. Though no one to my knowledge suspected him of preserving any morbid sentiment for the old asylum, it was difficult to forget that his grandfather had been the director of the Shire County Sanitarium during its declining years and that his father had closed down the place under circumstances that remained an obscure episode in the town's history. If we spoke very little about the asylum and its burial ground, Mr. Locrian spoke of them not at all. This reticence, no doubt, served only to strengthen in our minds the intangible bond which seemed to exist between him and the awful ruin that sealed the horizon. Even I, who knew the old man better than anyone else in the town, regarded him with a degree of circumspection. Outwardly, of course, I was courteous to him, even friendly; he was, after all, the oldest and most reliable patron of my business. And not long after the demolition of the asylum was concluded, and the last of its former residents' remains had been exhumed and hastily cremated, Mr. Locrian paid me a visit.

At the very moment he entered the shop, I was examining some volumes of curiosa which had just arrived for him by special order. But even if I had grown jaded to such coincid-

ences following years of dealing in books, which have a quality about them that seems to breed events of this nature, there was something unpleasant about this particular freak of timing.

"Afternoon," I said. "You know, I was just looking over—"

"So I see."

Mr. Locrian approached the counter where tiers of books left very little open space. As he glanced at these new arrivals—hardly interested, it seemed—he slowly unbuttoned his overcoat, a bulky thing which made his head appear somewhat small for his body. How easily I can envision him on that day. And even now his voice sounds clear in my memory, a voice that was far too quiet for the old man's harshly brilliant eyes. After a few moments he turned and casually began to wander about the shop, as if seeking out others who might be secluded among its stacks. He rounded a corner and momentarily left my view. "So at last it's done," he said. "Something of a feat, I would say. A deed worthy of record."

"I suppose it is," I replied, watching as Mr. Locrian traversed the rear aisle of the shop, appearing and disappearing as he passed by several rows of shelves.

"Without doubt it is," he said, proceeding straight down the aisle in front of me. Finally reaching the counter behind which I stood, he placed his hands upon it, leaned forward, and said: "But what has been achieved, what has really changed?"

The tone of voice in which he posed this question was both sardonic and morose, carrying undesirable connotations that echoed in all the remote places where truth had

been shut up and abandoned like a howling imbecile. Nonetheless, I held to the lie.

“If you mean that there's very little difference now, I would have to agree. Only the removal of an eyesore. That was all we intended to do. Simply that.”

Then I tried to draw his attention to the books that had arrived for him that day. But I was coldly interrupted when he said: “We must be walking different streets, Mr. Crane, and seeing quite different faces, hearing different voices in this town.” He paused, as if waiting for me to contradict him. His face took on a sly look. “Tell me, Mr. Crane, did you ever hear those stories about the sanitarium? What some people saw in its windows? Perhaps you yourself were one of them.”

I said nothing, which he might have accepted as a confirmation that I was one of those people. He continued:

“And isn't there now the same sense of consternation, here in this town, as those stories inspired in anyone who heard them? Can you admit that the days and nights are much worse now than they were before? Of course, you may tell me that it's just the moodiness of the season, the chill, the dour afternoons you observe through your shop window. On my way here, I actually heard some people saying such things. They also said other things which they didn't think I could hear. Somehow everyone seems to know about these books of mine, Mr. Crane.”

He did not look at me while delivering this last remark, but began to pace slowly between one end of the counter and the other.

“I'm sorry, Mr. Locrian, if you feel that I've violated some trust. I never imagined it would mean anything.”

He paused in his pacing and now gazed at me with an expression of almost paternal forgiveness.

"Of course," he said. "But things are now very different, will you allow that?"

"Yes," I finally conceded.

"But no one is exactly sure in what way things are different."

"No," I agreed.

"Did you know that my grandfather, *Doctor* Harkness Locrian, was buried in that cemetery you ravaged?"

Feeling a sudden surprise and embarrassment, I replied: "I'm sure if you had said something." But he ignored my words as if I had said nothing at all, or at least nothing that would deter him from imposing his confidences on me.

"Is this safe to sit in?" he asked, pointing to an old chair by the front window. And beyond the window, unobstructed, the pale autumn sun was sinking down.

"Yes, help yourself," I said, noticing some passersby who had noticed Mr. Locrian and looked oddly at him.

"My grandfather," Mr. Locrian continued, "felt at home with his lunatics. You may be startled to hear such a thing. Though the house that is now mine was once his, he did not spend any time there, not even to sleep. It was only after they closed down the sanitarium that he actually became a resident of his own home, which by then had become the residence where I lived with my parents, who now had charge of the old man.

"My grandfather passed his final years in a small upstairs room overlooking the outskirts of town, and I recall seeing him day after day gazing through his window at the sanitarium."

"I had no idea," I interjected. "That seems rather—"

"Please, before you are led to think that his was merely a sentimental attachment, however perverse, let me say that it was no such thing. His feelings with respect to the sanitarium were in fact quite incredible by reason of the manner in which he had used his authority at that place. I found out about this when I was still very young, but not so young that I could not understand the profound conflict that existed between my father and grandfather. I disregarded my parents' admonitions that I not spend too much time with the old man, succumbing to the mystery of his presence. And one afternoon he revealed himself.

"He was gazing through the window and never once turned to face me. But after we had sat in silence for some time, he started to whisper something. 'They questioned,' he said. 'They accused. They complained that no one in that place ever became well.' Then he smiled and began to elaborate. 'What things had they seen,' he hissed, 'to give them such… wisdom? They did not look into the faces,' no, he did not say 'faces' but 'eyes.' Yes, he said, '… did not look into the *eyes* of those beings, the eyes that reflected the lifeless beauty of the silent, staring universe itself.'

"Those were his words. And then he talked about the voices of the patients under his care. He whispered, and I quote, that 'the wonderful music of those voices spoke the supreme delirium of the planets as they go round and round like bright puppets dancing in the blackness.' In the wandering words of those lunatics, he told me, the ancient mysteries were restored.

"Like all true mysteriarchs," Mr. Locrian went on, "my grandfather aspired to a knowledge that was unspoken and

unspeakable. And every volume of the strange library he left to his heirs attests to this aspiration. As you know, I have added to this collection in my own way, as did my father. But our reasons were not those of the old doctor. At his sanitarium, Dr. Locrian had done something very strange, something that perhaps only he possessed both the knowledge and the impulse to do. It was not until many years later that my father attempted to explain everything to me, as I now am attempting to explain it to you.

"I have said that my grandfather was and always had been a mysteriarch, never a philanthropist of the mind, not a restorer of wounded psyches. In no way did he take a therapeutic approach with the inmates at the sanitarium. He did not view them as souls that were possessed, either by demons or by their own painful histories, but as beings who held a strange alliance with other orders of existence, who contained within themselves a particle of something eternal, a golden speck of magic which he thought might be enlarged. Thus, his ambition led him not to relieve his patients' madness, but to *exasperate* it—to let it breathe with a life of its own. And this he did in certain ways that wholly eradicated what human attributes remained in these people. But sometimes that peculiar magic he saw in their eyes would seem to fade, and then he would institute his 'proper treatment,' which consisted of putting them through a battery of hellish ordeals intended to loosen their attachment to the world of humanity and to project them further into the realm of the 'silent, staring universe' where the insanity of the infinite might work a rather paradoxical cure. The result was something as pathetic as a puppet and as exalted as the stars, something at once dead and never dying, a thing

utterly without destiny and thus imperishable, forever consigned to that abysmal vacuity which is the essence of all that is immortal. And somehow, in his last days, my grandfather used this same procedure on himself, reaching into spaces beyond death.

"I know this to be true, because one night late into my childhood, I awoke and witnessed the proof. Leaving my bed, I walked down the hallway toward the closed door of my grandfather's room. Stopping in front of that door, I turned its cold handle and peeked timidly into the room, where I saw my grandfather sitting before the window in the moonlight. My curiosity must have overcome my horror, for I actually spoke to this specter. 'What are you doing here, Grandfather?' I asked. And without turning away from the window, he replied: 'We are doing just what you see.' Of course, what I saw was an old man who belonged in his grave, but who was now staring out his window across to the windows of the sanitarium, where others who were not human stared back.

"When I fearfully alerted my parents to what I had seen, I was stunned that my father responded not with disbelief but with anger. I had disobeyed his warnings about my grandfather's room. Then he revealed the truth just as I now reveal it to you, and year after year he reiterated and expanded upon this enigmatic learning: why that room must always be kept shut and why the sanitarium must never be disturbed. You may not be aware that an earlier effort to destroy the sanitarium was aborted through my father's intervention. He was far more attached than I could ever be to this town, which ceased to have a future long ago. How long has it been since a new building was erected here? This place would

have crumbled in time. The natural course of things would have dismantled it, just as the asylum would have disappeared had it been left alone. But when all of you rose up and marched toward the old ruin, I felt no impulse to interfere. You have brought it on yourselves," he complacently ended.

"And what is it we have done?" I asked in a cold voice, now suppressing a mysterious outrage.

"You are only trying to preserve what remains of your mind's peace. You know that something is very wrong in this town, that you should never have done what you did. But still you cannot draw any conclusion from what I have told you."

"With all respect, Mr. Locrian, how can you expect me to believe what you've told me?"

He laughed weakly. "Actually, I don't. But in time you will come to know. And then I will tell you more things, things you will not be able to keep yourself from believing."

As he pushed himself up from the chair by the window, I asked: "Why tell me anything? Why did you come here today?"

"Why? Because I thought that perhaps my books might have arrived, let me just take them like that. And also because everything is finished now. The others," he shrugged, "... hopeless. You are the only one who could understand. Not now, but in time."

And now I do understand what the old man told me as I never could on that autumn day some forty years ago.

It was toward the end of that same sullen day, in the course of a bleak twilight, that they began to appear. Like figures quietly emerging from the depths of memory, they

struggled in the shadows and slowly became visible. But even if the transition had been subtle, insidiously graduated, it did not long go unnoticed. By nightfall they were distractingly conspicuous throughout the town, always framed in some high window of the structures they occupied: the living quarters above the shops in the heart of the town, the highest story of the old hotel, the empty towers of civic buildings, the lofty turrets and grand gables of the most distinguished houses, and the attics of the humblest homes.

Their forms were as softly lustrous as the autumn constellations in the black sky above, their faces glowing with the same fixed expression of placid vacuity. And the habiliments of these apparitions were grotesquely suited to their surroundings. Buried many years before in antiquated clothes of a formal cut, they seemed to belong to the dying town in a manner its living members could not emulate. For the streets of the town now lost what life was left in them and became the dark corridors of a museum where these waxen nightmares had been put on exhibition.

In daylight, when viewed at street level, the figures in the windows took on a dull wooden appearance. Somehow that was less maddening. It was then that some of us ventured into those high rooms. But nothing was ever found on the other side of what were now *their* windows—nothing save a tenantless room which no light would illuminate and which sooner or later drove us away in seizures of uncanny dread. By night, when it seemed we could hear them erratically tapping on the floors above us, their presence in our homes drove us out into the streets. Day and night we became sleepless vagrants, strangers in our own town. As I remember, we eventually ceased to recognize one another. But one name,

one face was still known to all—that of Mr. Harkness Locrian, whose gaze haunted every one of us.

It was undoubtedly in his house that the fire began which consumed every corner of the town. There were attempts made to oppose its path, but they were half-hearted and soon abandoned. For the most part we stood in silence, vacantly staring as the flames burned their way up to the high windows where spectral figures posed like portraits in their frames.

Ultimately these demons were exorcised, their windows left empty. But only after the town had been annulled by the holocaust.

Nothing more than charred wreckage remained. Afterward it got around that one of our citizens perished in the conflagration, though none of us inquired into the exact circumstances under which old Mr. Locrian met his fiery death.

No effort was made by anyone to recover the town we had lost. When the first snow fell that year, it fell upon unclaimed ruins. But now, after the passing of so many years, it is not the ashen rubble of that town which haunts each of my hours; it is that one great ruin in whose shadow my mind has been interned.

And if they have kept me in this room because I speak to a charred face that appears at my window, then let them protect this same room from violations after I am gone. For Mr. Locrian has been true to his promise; he has told me of certain things when I was ready to hear them. And he has other things to tell me, secrets surpassing all insanity. Commending me to an absolute cure, he will have immured another soul within the black and boundless walls of that eternal

asylum where stars dance forever like bright puppets in the silent, staring void.

Dr. Locrian's Asylum (1989 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

First published in *Grue Magazine* #5, 1987

Years passed and no one in our town, no one I could name, allotted a single word to that great ruin which marred the evenness of the horizon. Nor was mention made of that darkly gated patch of ground closer to the town's edge. Even in days more remote, few things were said about these sites. Perhaps someone would propose tearing down the old asylum and razing the burial-ground where no inmate had been interred for a generation or more; and perhaps a few others, swept along by the moment, would nod their heart's assent. But the resolution always remained poorly formed, very soon losing its shape entirely, its impetus dying a gentle death in the gentle old streets of our town.

Then how can I explain that sudden turn of events, that overnight conversion which set our steps toward that hulking and decayed edifice, trampling its graveyard along the way? In answer, I propose the existence of a secret movement, one conducted in the souls of the town's citizens, and in their dreams. Conceived thus, the mysterious conversion loses some of its mystery: one need only accept that we were all haunted by the same revenant, that certain images began to establish themselves deep within each of us and became

part of our hidden lives. Finally, we resolved that we could no longer live as we had been.

When the idea of positive action first arose, the residents of the humble west end of town were the most zealous and impatient. For it was they who had suffered the severest unease, living as they did in close view of the wild plots and crooked headstones of that crowded strip of earth where mad minds had come to be shut away for eternity. But we all shared the burden of the crumbling asylum itself, which seemed to be visible from every corner of town—from the high rooms of the old hotel, from the quiet rooms of our houses, from streets obscured by morning mist or twilight haze, and from my own shop whenever I looked out its front window. The setting sun would always be half-hidden by that massive silhouette, that huge broken headstone of some unspeakable grave. But more disturbing than our own view of the asylum was the idiotic gaze that it seemed to cast back at us, and through the years certain shamefully superstitious persons actually claimed to have seen mad-eyed and immobile figures staring out from the asylum's windows on nights when the moon shone with unusual brightness and the dark sky above the town appeared to contain more than its usual share of stars. Although few people spoke of such experiences, almost everyone had seen other sights at the asylum that no one could deny. And what strange things were brought to mind because of them; all over town vague scenes were inwardly envisioned.

As children, most of us had paid a visit at some time to that forbidden place, and later we carried with us memories of our somber adventures. Over the years we came to com-

pare what we experienced, compiling this knowledge of the asylum until it became unseemly to augment it further.

By all accounts that old institution was a chamber of horrors, if not in its entirety then at least in certain isolated corners. It was not simply that a particular room attracted notice for its atmosphere of desolation: the gray walls pocked like sponges, the floor filthied by the years entering freely through broken windows, and the shallow bed withered after supporting so many nights of futile tears and screaming. There was something more.

Perhaps one of the walls to such a room would have built into it a sliding panel, a long rectangular slot near the ceiling. And on the other side would be another room, an unfurnished room which seemed never to have been occupied. But leaning against one wall of this other room, directly below the sliding panel, would be some long wooden sticks; and mounted at the ends of these sticks would be horrible little puppets.

Another room might be completely bare, yet its walls would be covered with pale fragments of weird funereal scenes. By removing some loose floorboards at the center of the room, one would discover several feet of earth piled upon an old, empty coffin. And then there was a very special room, a room I had visited myself, that was located on the uppermost floor of the asylum and contained a great windowless skylight.

Positioned under that opening upon the heavens, and fixed securely in place, stood a long table with huge straps hanging from its sides.

There may have been other rooms of a strange type which memory has forbidden to me. But somehow none of

them was singled out for comment during the actual dismantling of the asylum, when most of us were busy heaving the debris of years through great breaches we had made in the asylum's outer walls, while some distance away the rest of the town witnessed the wrecking in a cautious state of silence. Among this group was Mr. Harkness Locrian, a thin and large-eyed old gentleman whose silence was not like that of the others.

Perhaps we expected Mr. Locrian to voice opposition to our project, but he did not do so at any stage of the destruction. Although no one, to my knowledge, suspected him of preserving any morbid sentiment for the old asylum, it was difficult to forget that his grandfather had been the director of the Shire County Sanitarium during its declining years and that his father had closed down the place under circumstances that remained an obscure episode in the town's history. If we spoke very little about the asylum and its graveyard, Mr. Locrian spoke of them not at all. This reticence, no doubt, served only to strengthen in our minds the intangible bond which seemed to exist between him and the awful ruin that sealed the horizon. Even I, who knew the old man better than anyone else in the town, regarded him with a degree of circumspection. Outwardly, of course, I was courteous to him, even friendly; he was, after all, the oldest and most reliable patron of my business. And not long after the demolition of the asylum was concluded, and the last of its former residents' remains had been exhumed and hastily cremated, Mr. Locrian paid me a visit.

At the very moment he entered the shop, I was examining some books which had just arrived for him by special order. But even if I had grown jaded to such coincidences following

years of dealing in books, which have some peculiarity about them that breeds events of this nature, there was something unpleasant about this particular freak of timing.

"Afternoon," I greeted. "You know, I was just looking over..."

"I see," he said, approaching the counter where tiers of books left very little open space. As he glanced at these new arrivals—hardly interested, it seemed—he slowly unbuttoned his overcoat, a bulky thing which made his head appear somewhat small for his body. How easily I can envision him on that day. And even now his voice sounds clear in my memory, a voice that was far too quiet for the old man's harshly brilliant eyes. After a few moments he turned and casually began to wander about the shop, as if seeking out observers who might be secluded among its stacks. He rounded a corner and momentarily left my view. "So at last it's done," he said. "Something of a feat, a striking page of local history."

"I suppose it is," I answered, watching as Mr. Locrian traversed the rear aisle of the shop, appearing and disappearing as he passed by several rows of shelves.

"Without doubt it is," he replied, proceeding straight down the aisle in front of me. Finally reaching the counter behind which I stood, he placed his hands upon it, leaned forward, and asked: "But what has been achieved, what has really changed?"

The tone of voice in which he posed this question was both sardonic and morose, carrying undesirable connotations that echoed in all the remote places where truth had been shut up and abandoned like a howling imbecile. Nonetheless, I held to the lie.

“If you mean that there's very little difference now, I would have to agree. Only the removal of an eyesore. That was all we intended to do. Simply that.”

Then I tried to draw his attention to the books that had arrived for him, but I was coldly interrupted when he said: “We must be walking different streets, Mr. Crane, and seeing quite different faces, hearing different voices in this town. Tell me,” he asked, suddenly animated, “did you ever hear those stories about the sanitarium? What some people saw in its windows? Perhaps you yourself were one of them.”

I said nothing, which he might have accepted as a confirmation that I was one of those people. He continued:

“And isn't there much the same feeling now, in this town, as there was in those stories? Can you admit that the days and nights are much worse now than they were... before? Of course, you may tell me that it's just the moodiness of the season, the chill, the dour afternoons you observe through your shop window. On my way here, I actually heard some people saying such things. They also said other things which they didn't think I could hear. Somehow everyone seems to know about these books of mine, Mr. Crane.”

He did not look at me while delivering this last remark, but began to pace slowly from one end of the counter to the other, then back again.

“I'm sorry, Mr. Locrian, if you feel that I've violated some confidence. I never imagined that it would make any difference.”

He paused in his pacing and now gazed at me with an expression of almost paternal forgiveness.

“Of course,” he said in his earlier, quiet voice. “But things are very different now, will you allow that?”

"... Yes," I conceded.

"But no one is sure exactly in what way they are different."

"No," I agreed.

"Did you know that my grandfather, *Doctor* Harkness Locrian, was buried in that graveyard?"

Feeling a sudden surprise and embarrassment, I replied: "I'm sure if you had said something." But it was as if I were the one who had said nothing at all, nothing that would deter him from what he had come to tell me.

"Is this safe to sit in?" he asked, pointing to an old chair by the front window. And beyond the window, unobstructed, the pale autumn sun was sinking down.

"Yes, help yourself," I said, noticing some passersby who had noticed Mr. Locrian and looked oddly at him.

"My grandfather," Mr. Locrian continued, "felt at home with his lunatics. You maybe startled to hear such a thing. Although the house that is now mine was once his, he did not spend his time there, not even to sleep. It was only after they closed down the sanitarium that he actually became a resident of his own home, which was also the home of myself and my parents, who now had charge of the old man. Of course, you probably don't remember. ...

"My grandfather passed his final years in a small upstairs room overlooking the outskirts of town, and I recall seeing him day after day gazing through his window at the sanitarium..."

"I had no idea," I interjected. "That seems rather—"

"Please, before you are led to think that his was merely a sentimental attachment, however perverse, let me say that it was no such thing. His feelings with respect to the sanit-

arium were in fact quite incredible, owing to the manner in which he had used his authority at that place. I found out about this when I was still very young, but not so young that I could not understand the profound conflict that existed between my father and grandfather. I disregarded my parents' admonitions that I not spend too much time with the old man, succumbing to the mystery of his presence. And one afternoon he revealed himself.

"He was gazing through the window and never once turned to face me. But after we had sat in silence for some time, he started to whisper something. 'They questioned,' he said. 'They accused. They complained that no one in that place ever became well.' Then he smiled and began to elaborate. 'What things had they seen,' he hissed, 'to give them such… wisdom? They did not look into the faces,' no, he did not say 'faces' but 'eyes.' Yes, he said, '… did not look into the eyes of those beings, the eyes that reflected the lifeless beauty of the silent, staring universe itself.'

"Those were his words. And then he talked about the voices of the patients under his care. He whispered, and I quote, that 'the wonderful music of those voices spoke the supreme delirium of the planets as they go round and round like bright puppets dancing in the blackness.' In the wandering words of those lunatics, he told me, the ancient mysteries were restored.

"Like all true mysteriarchs," Mr. Locrian went on, "my grandfather desired a knowledge that was unspoken and unspeakable. And every volume of the strange library he left to his heirs attests to this desire. As you know, I have added to this collection in my own way, as did my father. But our reasons were not those of the old doctor. At his sanitarium, Dr.

Locrian had done something very strange, something that perhaps only he possessed both the knowledge and the impulse to do. It was not until many years later that my father attempted to explain everything to me, as I now am attempting to explain it to you.

"I have said that my grandfather was and always had been a mysteriarch, never a philanthropist of the mind, not a restorer of wounded psyches. In no way did he take a therapeutic approach with the inmates at the sanitarium. He did not view them as souls that were possessed, either by demons or by their own painful histories, but as beings who held a strange alliance with other orders of existence, who contained within themselves a particle of something eternal, a golden speck of magic which he thought might be enlarged. Thus, his ambition led him not to relieve his patients' madness, but to *exasperate* it—to let it breathe with a life of its own. And this he did in certain ways that wholly eradicated what human qualities remained in these people. But sometimes that peculiar magic he saw in their eyes would seem to fade, and then he would institute his 'proper treatment,' which consisted of putting them through a battery of hellish ordeals intended to loosen their attachment to the world of humanity and to project them further into the absolute, the realm of the 'silent, staring universe' where the ultimate insanity of the infinite void might work a rather paradoxical cure. The result was something as pathetic as a puppet and as magnificent as the stars, something at once dead and never dying, a thing utterly without destiny and thus imperishable, possessing that abysmal absence of mind, that infinite vacuity which is the essence of all that is immortal. And somehow, in his last days, my grandfather used

this same procedure on himself, reaching into spaces beyond death.

"I know this to be true, because one night late in my childhood, I awoke and witnessed the proof. Leaving my bed, I walked down the moonlit hallway, feeling irresistibly drawn toward the closed door of my grandfather's room. Stopping in front of that door, I turned its cold handle and slowly pushed back its strange nocturnal mass. Peeking timidly into the room, I saw my grandfather sitting before the window in the bright moonlight. My curiosity must have overcome my horror, for I actually spoke to this specter. 'What are you doing here, Grandfather?' I asked. And without turning away from the window, he slowly and tonelessly replied: 'We are doing just what you see.' Of course, what I saw was an old man who belonged in his grave, but who was now staring out his window across to the windows at the sanitarium, where others who were not human stared back.

"When I fearfully alerted my parents to what I had seen, I was surprised that my father responded not with disbelief but with anger: I had disobeyed his warnings about my grandfather's room. Then he revealed the truth just as I now reveal it to you, and year after year he reiterated and expanded upon this secret learning: why that room must always be kept shut and why the sanitarium must never be disturbed. You may not be aware that an earlier effort to destroy the sanitarium was aborted through my father's intervention. He was far more attached than I could ever be to this town, which ceased to have a future long ago. How long has it been since a new building was added to all the old ones? This place would have crumbled in time. The natural course of

things would have dismantled it, just as the asylum would have disappeared had it been left alone. But when all of you took up those implements and marched toward the old ruin, I felt no desire to interfere. You have brought it on yourselves," he complacently ended.

"And what is it we have done?" I asked in a cold voice, now suppressing a mysterious outrage.

"You are only trying to preserve what remains of your mind's peace. You know that something is very wrong in this town, that you should never have done what you did, but still you cannot draw any conclusion from what I have told you."

"With all respect, Mr. Locrian, how can you imagine that I believe anything you've told me?"

He laughed weakly. "Actually, I don't. As you say, how could I? Without being somewhat mad, that is. But in time you will. And then I will tell you more things, things you will not be able to keep yourself from believing."

As he pushed himself up from the chair by the window, I asked: "Why tell me anything? Why did you come here today?"

"Why? Because I thought that perhaps my books had arrived, let me just take them like that. And also because everything is finished now. The others," he shrugged, "... hopeless. You are the only one who could understand. Not now, but in time."

And now I do understand what the old man told me as I never could on that autumn day some forty years ago.

It was toward the end of that same sullen day, in the course of a bleak twilight, that they began to appear. Like figures quietly emerging from the depths of memory, they

struggled in the shadows and slowly became visible. But even if the transition had been subtle, insidiously graduated, it did not long go unnoticed. By nightfall they were distractingly conspicuous throughout the town, always framed in some high window of the structures they occupied: the rooms above the shops in the heart of the town, the highest story of the old hotel, the empty towers of civic buildings, the lofty turrets and grand gables of the most distinguished houses, and the attics of the humblest homes.

Their forms were as softly luminous as the autumn constellations in the black sky above, their faces glowing with the same fixed expression of placid vacuity. And the attire of these apparitions was grotesquely suited to their surroundings. Buried many years before in antiquated clothes of a formal and funereal cut, they seemed to belong to the dying town in a manner its living members could not emulate. For the streets of the town now lost what life was left in them and became the dark corridors of a museum where these waxen nightmares had been put on exhibition.

In daylight, when the figures in the windows took on a dull wooden appearance that seemed less maddening, some of us ventured into those high rooms. But nothing was ever found on the other side of *their* windows, nothing save a tenantless room which no light would illuminate and which sooner or later inspired any living occupant with a demented dread. By night, when it seemed we could hear them erratically tapping on the floors above us, their presence in our homes drove us out into the streets. Day and night we became sleepless vagrants, strangers in our own town. Eventually we may have ceased to recognize one another. But one

name, one face was still known to all—that of Mr. Harkness Locrian, whose gaze haunted each one of us.

It was undoubtedly in his house that the fire began which mindlessly consumed every corner of the town. There were attempts made to oppose its path, but they were half-hearted and soon abandoned. For the most part we stood in silence, vacantly staring as the flames burned their way up to the high windows where spectral figures posed like portraits in their frames.

Ultimately these demons were exorcized, their windows left empty. But only after the town had been annulled by the holocaust.

Nothing more than charred wreckage remained. Afterward it was reported that one of our citizens had been taken by the fire, though none of us inquired into the exact circumstances under which old Mr. Locrian met his death.

There was, of course, no effort made to recover the town we had lost: when the first snow fell that year, it fell upon ruins grown cold and dreadful. But now, after the passing of so many years, it is not the ashen rubble of that town which haunts each of my hours; it is that one great ruin in whose shadow my mind has been interned.

And if they have kept me in this room because I speak to faces that appear at my window, then let them protect this same room from violations after I am gone. For Mr. Locrian has been true to his promise; he has told me of certain things when I was ready to hear them. And he has other things to tell me, secrets surpassing all insanity. Commending me to an absolute cure, he will have immured another soul within the black and boundless walls of that eternal

asylum where stars dance forever like bright puppets in the silent, staring void.

The Music Of The Moon (2010 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

First published in *Fantasy Macabre* #9, 1987

With considerable interest, and some disquiet, I listened while a small pale man named Tressor told of his remarkable experience, his mild voice barely breaking the quiet of a moonlit room. It seems he was one of those who could not rest and, as a poor substitute for unconsciousness, habitually took to the streets in search of what our city has to offer by way of diversion. There are nightspots, of course, where one may pass the hours until daybreak. But their entertainments soon grow stale for the perpetually sleepless, who in any event have no use for a crowd that is wide-awake *by choice*. Nevertheless, there are certain individuals, and Tressor was one of them, to whom our city may disclose its nocturnal mysteries. In the absence of dreams that preserve the balance of the ordinary world, who would not be on the lookout for beguilements to replace them?

Indeed, there are enchantments that nearly make amends for one's stolen slumber. To gaze up and glimpse some unusual shape loping across steep roofs with a bewildering agility might well be compensation for many nights of sleepless hell. Or to hear sinister whispers in one of our narrow streets, and to follow them through the night without ever being able to close in on them, yet without their ever fading

in the slightest degree—this very well might relieve the wearing effects of an awful wakefulness. And what if these incidents remain inconclusive, if they are left as merely enticing episodes, undocumented and underdeveloped? May they not still serve their purpose? And how many has our city *saved* in this manner, staying their hands from the knife, the rope, or the poison vial? Yet if there is any truth to what I believe has happened to Tressor, he just may have become lost in an exploit of uncommon decisiveness.

I should say that when Tressor told me his story, I believed it to be an exaggeration, an embellished version of one of his nightlong adventures. It seems that during one of his blank nights of insomnia, he had wandered into the older section of town where the activity is as unreserved as it is constant throughout the night. As I have previously stated, Tressor was among those who was not averse to whatever obscure caper our city might extend to him. Thus, he gave more than modest scrutiny to a character standing by the steps of a rotten old building, noting that this man seemed to be loitering to no special purpose, his hands buried in the pockets of his overcoat and his eyes gazing upon the passersby with a look of profound patience. The building outside of which he stood was itself a rather plain structure, one notable only for its windows, the way some faces are distinctive solely by virtue of an interesting pair of eyes. These windows were not the slender rectangles of most of the other buildings along the street, but were half-circles divided into several slice-shaped panes. And in the moonlight they seemed to shine in a particularly striking way, though possibly this was merely an effect of contrast to the surrounding area, where a few clean pieces of glass will inevitably draw atten-

tion to themselves. I cannot say for certain which may be upheld as the explanation.

In any case, Tressor was passing by this building, the one with those windows, when the man standing by the steps shoved something at him, leaving it in his grasp. And as he did so, he looked straight and deep into poor Tressor's eyes, which the insomniac was quick to lower and fix upon the object in his hand. What had been given to him was a small sheet of paper, and further down the street Tressor paused by a lamp post to read the thin lines of tiny letters. Printed in black ink on one side of a coarse, rather gummy grade of pulp, the handbill announced an evening's entertainment later that same night at the building he had just passed. Tressor looked back at the man who had handed him this announcement, but he was no longer standing in his place. For a moment this seemed very odd, for despite his casual, even restful appearance of waiting for no one and for nothing, this man did seem to have been somehow attached to that particular spot outside the building. Now his sudden absence caused Tressor to feel... confused, which is to say, captivated.

Once again Tressor scanned the page in his hand, absentmindedly rubbing it between his thumb and fingers. It did have a strange texture, like ashes mixed with grease. Soon, however, he began to feel that he was giving the matter too much thought; and, as he resumed his insomniac peregrinations, he flung the sheet aside. But before it reached the pavement, the handbill was snatched out of the air by someone walking very swiftly in the opposite direction. Glancing back, Tressor found it difficult to tell which of the

other pedestrians had retrieved the paper. He then continued on his way.

Later that night, he returned to the building whose windows were shining half-circles. Entering through the front door, which was unlocked and unattended, he proceeded down silent, empty hallways. Along the walls were lamps in the form of dimly glowing spheres. Turning a corner, Tressor was suddenly faced with a black abyss, within which an unlighted stairway began to emerge as his eyes grew accustomed to the greater dark. After some hesitation he went up the stairs, playing a brittle music upon the old planks. From the first landing of the stairway he could see the soft lights above, and rather than turning back he ascended toward them. The second floor, however, much resembled the first, as did the third and all the succeeding floors. Reaching the heights of the building, Tressor began to roam around once again, even opening some of the doors.

But most of the rooms behind these doors were dark and empty, and the moonlight that shone through the perfectly clear windows fell upon bare, dust-covered floors and unadorned walls. Tressor was about to turn around and head back outside when he spotted at the end of the last hallway a door with a faint yellow aura leaking out at its edges. He walked up to this door, which was slightly opened, and cautiously pushed it back.

Peering into the room, Tressor saw the yellowish globe of light which hung from the ceiling. Scanning slowly down the walls, he spied small, shadowlike things moving in corners and along the floor molding—the consequences of inept housekeeping, he concluded. Then he saw something by the far wall which made him withdraw back into the hall-

way. What he had glimpsed were four strangely contoured figures, the tallest of which was nearly his height, while the smallest was half his size. Once out in the hallway, though, he found these images had become clearer in his mind. He now felt almost sure of their true nature, though I have to confess that I could not imagine what they might have been until he spoke the key word: “cases.”

Venturing back into the room, Tressor stood before the closed cases which in all likelihood belonged to a quartet of musicians. They looked very old and were bound like books in some murky cloth. Tressor ran his fingers along this material, then before long began fingering the tarnished metal latches of the violin case. But he suddenly stopped when he saw a group of shadows rising on the wall in front of him.

“Why have you come in here?” asked a voice which sounded both exhausted and malicious.

“I saw the light,” answered Tressor without turning around, still crouching over the violin case. Somehow the sound of his own voice echoing in that empty room disturbed him more than that of his interrogator, though he could not at the moment say why this was. He counted four shadows on the wall, three of them tall and trim, and the fourth somewhat smaller but with an enormous, misshapen head.

“Stand up,” ordered the same voice as before.

Tressor stood up.

“Turn around.”

Tressor slowly turned around. And he was relieved to see standing before him three rather ordinary-looking men and a woman whose head was enveloped by pale, ragged clouds of hair. Moreover, among the men was the one who had

given Tressor the handbill earlier that night. But he now seemed to be much taller than he had been outside in the street.

"You handed me the paper," Tressor reminded the man as if trying to revive an old friendship. And again his voice sounded queer to him as it reverberated in that empty room.

The tall man looked to his companions, surveying each of the other three faces in turn, as though reading some silent message in their expressionless features. Then he removed a piece of paper from inside his coat.

"You mean this," he said to Tressor.

"Yes, that's it."

They all smiled gently at him, and the tall man said, "Then you're in the wrong place. You should be one floor up. But the main stairway won't take you to it. There's another, smaller flight of stairs in the back hallway. You should be able to see it. Are your eyes good?"

"Yes."

"Good as they look?" asked one of the other men.

"I can see very well, if that's what you mean."

"Yes, that's exactly what we mean," said the woman.

Then the four of them stepped back to make a path for Tressor, two on either side of him, and he started to walk from the room.

"There are already some people upstairs for the concert," said the tall man as Tressor reached the door. "We will be up shortly—to play!"

"Yes... yes... yes," muttered the others as they began fumbling with the dark cases containing their instruments.

"*Their* voices," thought Tressor, "not my voice."

As Tressor later explained it to me, the voices of the musicians, unlike his own, made no echoes of any kind in the empty room. Undeterred by the implications of this sonic abnormality, Tressor went to find the stairway, which at first looked like an empty shaft of blackness in the corner of the back hall. Guided by the flimsy railing that twisted in a spiral, he reached the uppermost level of the old building. Here the hallways were much narrower than those below, tight passages lit by spherical lamps caked with dust and hung at irregular intervals. There were also fewer doors, each of which was barely more than a cutout in the wall around it and thus quite difficult to discern, more easily found by touch it would seem than by sight. But Tressor's eyes were very good, as he claimed, and he soon found the entrance to a room where a number of people were already gathered, just as the musicians had said.

I can imagine that it was not easy for Tressor to decide whether or not to go through with what he had started that night. If the inability to sleep sometimes leads a sufferer into strange or perilous consolations, Tressor still retained enough of a daylight way of thought to make a compromise. He did not enter the room where he saw people slumped down in seats scattered about, the black silhouettes of human heads visible only in the moonlight which poured through the pristine glass of those particular windows. Instead, he hid in the shadows farther down the hallway. And when the musicians arrived upstairs, burdened with their instruments, they filed into the moonlit room without suspecting Tressor's presence outside. The door closed behind them with a hardly audible click.

For a few moments there was only silence, a purer silence than Tressor had ever known, like the silence of a dark, lifeless world. Then sound began to enter the silence, but so inconspicuously that Tressor could not tell when the absolute silence had ended and an embellished silence had begun. Sound became music, slow music in the soft darkness, music somewhat muffled as it passed through the intervening door. At first there was only a single note wavering in a universe of darkness, compelling those who heard it to an understanding of its subtle voice. This lone note carried an abundance of distinct overtones, and a few beats later a second note produced the same effect; then another note, and another, each of them mingling to create an incalculable proliferation of slightly dissonant harmonies. There was now more music than could possibly be contained by that earlier silence, expansive as it may have seemed. Soon there was no space remaining for silence, or perhaps music and silence became confused, indistinguishable from each other, as colors may merge into whiteness. And at last, for Tressor, that interminable sequence of wakeful nights, each a mirror to the one before it and the one to follow, was finally broken.

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When Tressor awoke, the light of a quiet gray dawn filled the narrow hallway where he lay hunched between peeling walls. Recalling in a moment the events of the previous night, he pushed himself to his feet and began walking toward the room whose door was still closed. He put his ear up to the rough wood but heard no sounds on the other side. In his mind a memory of wonderful music rose up and then quickly faded. As before, the music sounded muffled to him,

diminished in its power because he had been too fearful to enter the room where the music was played. But he entered it now.

And he was bemused to see the audience still in their seats, which were all facing four empty chairs and four abandoned instruments of varying size. The musicians themselves were nowhere in sight.

The spectators were all dressed in white hooded robes woven of some gauzy material, almost like ragged shrouds wrapped tightly around them. They were very quiet and very still, perhaps sleeping that profound sleep from which Tressor had just risen. But there was something about this congregation that filled Tressor with a strange fear, strange because he also sensed that they were completely helpless, and yet content to be so—hypnotics in ecstasy. As his eyes became sharper in the grayish twilight of the room, the robes worn by these paralyzed figures began to look more and more like bandages of some kind, a heavy white netting which bound them securely. “But they were not bandages, or robes, or shrouds,” Tressor finally told me. “They were webs, thick layers of webs which I first thought covered everyone's entire body.”

But this was only how it appeared to Tressor from his perspective behind the mummified audience. For as he moved along the outer edge of the terrible gathering, progressing toward the four empty chairs at the front of the room, he saw that each stringy white cocoon was woven to expose the face of its inhabitant. He also saw that the expressions on these faces were very similar. They might almost have been described as serene, Tressor told me, if only those faces had been whole. But none of them seemed to have any

eyes. The crowd was faced in the same direction to witness a spectacle it could no longer see, gazing at nothing with bleeding sockets. All save one of them, as Tressor finally discovered.

At the end of a rather chaotic row of chairs in the back of the room, one member of the audience stirred in his seat. As Tressor slowly approached this figure, with vague thoughts of rescue in his mind, he noticed that its eyelids were shut. Without delaying for an instant, he began tearing at the webs which imprisoned the victim, speaking words of hope as he worked at the horrible mesh. But then the closed eyelids of the bound figure popped open and looked around, ultimately focusing on Tressor.

“You're the only one,” said Tressor, laboring at the webby bonds.

“Shhhh,” said the other, “I'm waiting.”

Tressor paused in confusion, his fingers tangled with a gruesome stuff which felt sticky and abrasive, intolerably strange to touch.

“They might return,” insisted Tressor, even though he was not entirely sure whom he meant by “they.”

“They *will* return,” answered the other's soft but excited voice. “With the moon they will return with their wonderful music.”

Appalled by this enigma, Tressor began to back away. And I suspect that from within a number of those hollow sockets, four of them to be exact, the tiny eyes of strange creatures were watching him as he fled that horrible room.

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Afterward Tressor visited me night after night to tell me about the music, until it seemed I could almost hear it myself and could tell his story as my own. Soon he talked only about the music, as he recalled hearing it somewhat dulled by a closed door. When he tried to imagine what it would be like to have heard the music, as he phrased it, “in the flesh,” it was obvious that he had forgotten the fate of those who did hear it in this way. His voice became more and more faint as the music grew louder and clearer in his mind. Then one night Tressor stopped coming to visit me.

Now it seems I am the one who cannot sleep, especially when I see the moon hovering above our city—the moon all fat and pale, glaring down on us from within its gauzy webs of clouds. How can I rest beneath its enchanting gaze? And how can I keep myself from straying into a certain section of town as night after night I wander strange streets alone?

The Music Of The Moon (1989 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

First published in *Fantasy Macabre* #9, 1987

With considerable interest, and some disquiet, I listened while a small pale man named Tressor told of his experience, his mild voice barely breaking the silence of a moonlit room. It seems he was one of those who could not sleep, and so he often spent this superfluous time walking until daybreak, exchanging his natural rest for those nocturnal visions which our city will disclose to certain eyes. And who can resist such enchantment, even with the knowledge that it is really a secret evil which gilds our world with wonders, while this same evil may ultimately ruin both these wonders and our world. Above all, this paradox may pertain to the ones who find no rest in their beds.

But to gaze up and glimpse some unusual shape loping across steep roofs with a bewildering agility might be compensation for many nights of sleepless hells. Or to hear a nearly sensible murmuring, by moonlight, in one of our narrow streets, and to follow these whispers through the night without ever being able to close in on them, yet without their ever fading in the slightest degree—this very well might relieve the wearing effects of a monotonous torment. And what if most of these incidents remain inconclusive, and what if they are left as merely enticing episodes, undoc-

umented and underdeveloped? May they not still serve their purpose? And how many has our city *saved* in this manner, staying their hands from the knife, the rope, or the poison vial? However, as Tressor's story was an exaggeration, a heightened as well as embellished version of such vague adventures, I was not surprised that its outcome was more than normally conclusive, if what I believe has happened to him is true.

During one of his blank nights of insomnia, he had wandered into the older section of town where there is unreserved activity at all hours. But Tressor was only interested in exhausting, not engaging those hours, in using them up with as little pain as possible. Thus, he gave no more than modest scrutiny to the character standing by the steps of a rotten old building, except to note that this man was roughly his own stature and that he seemed to be loitering to no special purpose, his hands buried deep in the huge pouches of his overcoat and his eyes gazing upon the passersby with a look of profound patience. The building outside of which he stood was itself a rather plain structure, one notable only for its windows, the way some faces are distinctive solely by virtue of an interesting pair of eyes. These windows were not the slender rectangles of most of the other buildings along the street, but were in the shape of half-circles divided into several slice-shaped panes. And in the moonlight they seem to shine in a particularly striking way, though possibly this is merely an effect of contrast to the surrounding area, where a few clean pieces of glass will inevitably draw attention to themselves. I cannot say for certain which may be upheld as the explanation.

In any case, Tressor was passing by this building, the one with those windows, when the man standing by the steps shoved something at him, leaving it in his grasp. And as he did so, he looked straight and deep into poor Tressor's eyes, which Tressor was quick to lower and fix upon the object in his hand. What had been given to him was a small sheet of paper, and further down the street Tressor paused by a lamp-post to read the thin lines of tiny letters. Printed in black ink on one side of a coarse, rather gummy grade of pulp, the handbill announced an evening's entertainment later that same night at the building he had just passed. Tressor looked back at the man who had handed him this announcement, but he was no longer standing in his place and for a moment this seemed very odd, for despite his casual, even restful appearance of waiting for no one and for nothing, this man did seem to have been somehow attached to that particular spot outside the building, and now his sudden absence caused Tressor to feel... confused.

Once again Tressor scanned the page in his hand, absentmindedly rubbing it between his thumb and fingers. It did have a strange texture, like ashes mixed with grease. Soon, however, he began to feel that he was giving the matter too much thought; and, as he resumed his insomniac meandering, he flung the sheet aside. But before it reached the pavement, the handbill was snatched out of the air by someone walking very swiftly in the opposite direction. Glancing back, Tressor found it difficult to tell which of the other pedestrians had retrieved the paper. He then continued on his way.

But later that night, desperate for some distraction which mere walking seemed no longer able to provide him, he re-

turned to the building whose windows were shining half-circles.

He entered through the front door, which was unlocked and unattended, proceeding through silent, empty hallways. Along the walls were lamps in the form of dimly glowing spheres. Turning a corner, Tressor was suddenly faced with a black abyss, within which an unlighted stairway began to take shape as his eyes grew accustomed to the greater dark. After some hesitation he went up the stairs, playing a brittle music upon the old planks. From the first landing of the stairway he could see the soft lights above, and rather than turning back he ascended toward them. The second floor, however, much resembled the first, as did the third and all the succeeding floors. Reaching the heights of the building, Tressor began to roam around once again, even opening some of the doors.

But most of the rooms behind these doors were dark and empty, and the moonlight that shone through the perfectly clear windows fell upon bare, dust-covered floors and plain walls. Tressor was about to turn around and leave that place for good, when he spotted at the end of the last hallway a door with a faint yellow aura leaking out at its edges. He walked up to this door, which was slightly opened, and cautiously pushed it back.

Peering into the room, Tressor saw the yellowish globe of light which hung from the ceiling. Scanning slowly down the walls, he spied small, shadowlike things moving in corners and along the floor molding—the consequences of inept housekeeping, he concluded. Then he saw something by the far wall which made him quickly withdraw back into the hallway. What he had glimpsed were the dark outlines of

four strangely shaped figures leaning upon the wall, the tallest of which was nearly as tall as he was and the smallest, far smaller. But once out in the hallway, he found these images had become clearer in his mind. He now felt almost sure of their true nature, although I have to confess that I could not imagine what they might have been until he spoke the key word: “cases.”

Venturing back into the room, Tressor stood before the closed cases which in all likelihood belonged to a quartet of musicians. They looked very old and were bound like books in some murky cloth. Tressor ran his fingers along this material, then before long began fingering the tarnished metal latches of the violin case. But he suddenly stopped when he saw a group of shadows rising on the wall in front of him.

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given Tressor the handbill earlier that night. But he now seemed to be much taller than he had been outside in the street.

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"Yes."

"Good as they look?" asked one of the other men.

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Then the four of them stepped back to make a path for Tressor, two on either side of him, and he started to walk from the room.

"There are already some people upstairs for the concert," said the tall man as Tressor reached the door. "We will be up shortly—to play!"

"Yes... yes... yes," muttered the others as they began fumbling with the dark cases containing their instruments.

"*Their* voices," thought Tressor, "not my voice."

As Tressor later explained it to me, the voices of the musicians, unlike his own, made no echoes of any kind in the empty room. Nevertheless, Tressor went to find the stairway, which at first looked like an empty shaft of blackness in the corner of the back hall. Guided by the fragile railing that twisted in a spiral, he reached the uppermost level of the old building. And there the hallways were much narrower than those below, mere passageways lit by spherical lamps which were caked with dust and no longer appeared at even intervals. There were also fewer doors, and these could be better found by touch than by sight. But Tressor's eyes were very good, as he claimed, and he found the room where a number of people were already gathered, true to the musicians' claim.

I can imagine that it was not easy for Tressor to decide whether or not to go through with what he had started that night. If the inability to sleep sometimes leads a sufferer into strange or perilous consolations, Tressor still retained enough of a daylight way of thought to make a compromise. He did not enter the room where he saw people slumped down in seats scattered about, the black silhouettes of human heads visible only in the moonlight which poured through the pristine glass of those particular windows. Instead, he hid in the shadows farther down the hallway. And when the musicians arrived upstairs, burdened with their instruments, they filed into the moonlit room without suspecting Tressor's presence outside. The door closed behind them with a click that did not echo in the narrow hallway.

For a few moments there was only silence, a purer silence than Tressor had ever known, like the silence of a dark, lifeless world. Then sound began to enter the silence, but so in-

conspicuously that Tressor could not tell when the absolute silence had ended and an embellished silence had begun. Sound became music, slow and muffled music in the soft darkness, somewhat muted as it passed through the intervening door. At first there seemed to be only a single note wavering alone in a universe of darkness and silence, coaxing its hearers to an understanding of its subtle voice, to sense its secrets and perhaps to hear the unheard. The single note then burst into a shower of tones, proliferating harmonies, and at that exact moment a second note began to follow the same course; then another note, and another. There was now more music than could possibly be contained by that earlier silence, expansive as it may have seemed. Soon there was no space remaining for silence, or perhaps music and silence became confused, indistinguishable from each other, as colors may merge into whiteness. And at last, for Tressor, that interminable sequence of wakeful nights, each a mirror to the one before it and the one to follow, was finally broken.

*

When Tressor awoke, the light of a quiet gray dawn filled the narrow hallway where he lay hunched between peeling walls. Recalling in a moment the events of the previous night, he scrambled to his feet and began walking toward the room whose door was still closed. He put his ear up to the rough wood but heard no sounds on the other side. In his mind a memory of wonderful music rose up and then quickly faded. As before, the music sounded muffled to him, diminished in its power because he had been too fearful to

enter the room where the music was played. But he entered it now.

And he was surprised to see the audience still in their seats, which were all facing four empty chairs and four abandoned instruments of varying size. The musicians themselves were nowhere in sight.

The spectators were all dressed in white, hooded robes woven of some gauzy material, almost like ragged shrouds wrapped tightly around them. They were very quiet and very still, perhaps sleeping that profound sleep from which Tressor had just risen. Tressor felt a strange fear of this congregation, strange because he also sensed that they were completely helpless and no more capable of voluntary action than a roomful of abandoned dolls. As his eyes became sharper in the grayish twilight of the room, the robes worn by these paralyzed figures began to look more and more like bandages of some kind, a heavy white netting which bound them securely. “But they were not bandages, or robes, or shrouds,” Tressor finally told me. “They were webs, thick layers of webs which I first thought covered everyone's entire body.”

But this was only how it appeared to Tressor from his perspective behind the mummified audience. For as he moved along the outer edge of the terrible gathering, progressing toward the four empty chairs at the front of the room, he saw that each stringy white cocoon was woven to expose the face of its inhabitant. And he also saw that the expressions on these faces were very similar, and that they might almost have been described as serene, if only those faces had been whole. But none of them seemed to have any eyes: the crowd was faced in the same direction to witness a

spectacle it could no longer see, gazing at nothing with bleeding sockets. All save one of them, as Tressor finally discovered.

At the end of a rather chaotic row of chairs in the back of the room, one member of the dead audience stirred in his seat. As Tressor slowly approached this figure, with vague thoughts of rescue in his mind, he noticed that its eyelids were shut. Without delaying for an instant, he began tearing at the webs which imprisoned the victim, speaking words of hope as he worked at the horrible mesh. But then the closed eyelids of the bound figure popped open and looked around, ultimately focusing on Tressor.

“You're the only one,” said Tressor, laboring at the webby bonds.

“Shhhh,” said the other, “I'm waiting.”

Tressor paused in confusion, his fingers tangled with a gruesome stuff which felt sticky and abrasive, intolerably strange to touch.

“They might return,” insisted Tressor, even though he was not entirely sure whom he meant by “they.”

“They *will* return,” answered the other's soft but excited voice. “With the moon they will return with their wonderful music.”

Appalled by this enigma, fearful of things he could not name, Tressor began to back away. And I suspect that from within a number of those hollow sockets, four of them to be exact, the tiny eyes of strange creatures were watching him as he fled that horrible room.

*

Afterward Tressor visited me night after night to tell me about the music, until it seemed I could almost hear it myself and could tell his story as my own. Soon he talked only about the music, as he recalled hearing it somewhat dulled by a closed door. When he tried to imagine what it would be like to have heard the music, as he phrased it, "in the flesh," it was obvious that he had forgotten the fate of those who did hear it in this way. His voice became more and more faint as the music grew louder and clearer in his mind. Then one night Tressor stopped coming to visit me.

And now it seems that I am the one who cannot sleep, especially when I see the moon hovering above our city—the moon all pale and fat, glaring down on us from within its gauzy webs of clouds. And how can I rest beneath its enchanting gaze? How difficult it is to keep myself from straying into a certain section of town as night after night I wander strange streets alone.

The Journal Of J.P. Drapeau (2010 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

First published in *Dagon* #20, 1987

Introduction

It was late and we had been drinking. My friend, a poet who can become very excitable at times, looked across the table at me. Then he revived a pet grievance of his as though I had not heard it all before.

"Where is the writer," he began, "who is unstained by any habits of the human, who is the ideal of everything alien to living, and whose eccentricity, in its darkest phase, turns in on itself to form increasingly more complex patterns of strangeness? Where is the writer who has lived out his entire life in a prodigious dream that began on his day of birth, if not long before? Where is the writer from some molding backwater of the earth—the city of Bruges itself, that withered place which some dreamer has described as 'a corpse of the Middle Ages that sings to itself from innumerable bell-towers and lays bony bridges across the black veins of its old canals.'

"But perhaps our writer's home would have to be an even older, more decaying Bruges in some farther, more obscure Flanders... the one envisioned by Bruegel and by Ensor. Where is the writer who was begotten by two passionate masks in the course of those macabre festivities called *ker-*

messe? Who was abandoned to develop in his own way, left to a lonely evolution in shadowed streets and beside sluggish canals. Who was formed by the dreams around him as much as those within him, and who had satiated himself with recondite learning. Where is this writer, the one whose entangled hallucinations could be accommodated only by the most intimate of diaries? And this diary, this journal of the most unnecessary man who ever lived, would be a record of the most questionable experiences ever known, and the most beautiful."

"Of course, there is no such writer," I replied. "But there's always Drapeau. Out of anyone I could name, he most nearly meets, if I may say, those rather *severe* prerequisites of yours. Living the whole of his life in Bruges, keeping those notebooks of his, and he—"

But my friend the poet only moaned in despair:

"Drapeau, always Drapeau."

Excerpts from the Journal

April 31, 189—

I have noticed that certain experiences are left to languish in the corners of life, passed by like waifs on the street, as if they should be dissuaded from circulating too freely among legitimate persons. Since childhood, for example, not one day has passed in which I have failed to hear the *music of graveyards*. It sounds everywhere I go—a resonant chorus that fills the air and sometimes drowns out the voices of those who still live. And yet, to my knowledge, never has another soul on earth made mention of this ubiquitous singing, which vibrates even in the currents of our blood. Is

the circulation of upright society so poor that it cannot carry these dead notes? It must be a mere trickle!

December 24, 189—

Two tiny corpses, one male and the other female, rattle around that enormous closet in my bedroom. Though deceased, still they are quick enough to hide themselves whenever I need to enter the closet to retrieve something. I keep various odds and ends in there, stuffed into trunks or baskets and piled all over the place. I can't even see the floor or the walls any longer, and only if I hold a light high over my head can I study the layers of cobwebs floating about near the ceiling. After I close the door of the closet, its two miniature inhabitants resume their activities. Their voices are only faint squeaks which during the day hardly bother me at all. But sometimes I am kept awake far into the night by those interminable conversations of theirs.

May 31, 189—

After tossing about for most of the night, I went out for a walk. I had not gone far when I became spectator to a sad scene. Some yards ahead of me on the street, an old man was being forcibly led from a house by two other men who were quite large. They had him in restraints and were delivering him to a waiting vehicle. Laughing hysterically, the man was apparently destined for the asylum. As the scuffling trio reached the street, the eyes of the laughing man met my own. Suddenly he stopped laughing. Then, in a burst of resistance, he broke free of his escorts and ran right up to me.

“Never speak out,” he said frantically, almost weeping. “Never say a word about the things you know. I can tell by the look in your eyes.”

“But I am just an ordinary person” I said, seeing that his captors were approaching.

“Swear!” he demanded. “Or they will have us all.”

By then, however, his pursuers had caught up with him. As they dragged him off he began laughing just as before, and the peals of his laughter, in the early morning quiet, were soon devoured by the pealing of church bells. It was at that moment that I decided to heed the old man's warning and disguise certain perceptions of mine in the language of whimsy. Or leave them out altogether from these pages on the chance that someone might find them while I am still alive.

August 1, 189—

As a child I maintained some very strange notions. For instance, I used to believe that during the night, while I slept, demons removed parts of my body and played games with them, hiding my arms and legs, rolling my head across the floor. Of course I abandoned this belief as soon as I entered school, but it was not until much later that I discovered the truth about it. After assimilating many facts from various sources and allowing them to mingle in my mind, I was prepared for the realization. It happened one night as I was crossing a bridge that stretched over a narrow canal. (This was in a part of town fairly distant from where I live.) Pausing for a moment, as I routinely do when crossing one of these bridges, I gazed not down into the dark waters of the canal, but upwards into the night sky. It was those stars, I knew that now. Certain of them had been promised specific parts of my body. In the darkest hours of the night, when one is unusually sensitive to such things, I could—and still can, though just barely—feel the force of these stars tugging

away at various points, eager for the moment of my death when each of them might carry off that part of me which is theirs by right. Of course a child would misinterpret this experience. And how often I have found that every superstition has its basis in truth.

October 9, 189—

Last night I visited one of the little theaters that operate hereabouts and stood at the back for a while. Onstage was a magician, his shiny black hair parted straight down the middle, with full prestidigitatorial regalia about him: a long box to his left (moons and stars), a tall box to his right (oriental designs), and before him a low table covered with a red velvet cloth littered with diverse objects. The audience, a full house, cheered wildly after each trick he performed. At one point the magician divided the various sections of his assistant into separate boxes which he then proceeded to move to distant areas of the stage, while the dismembered hands and feet continued to wiggle about and the decapitated head laughed with a piercing intensity. The audience was at great pains to express its amusement. “Isn't it incredible!” exclaimed a man standing beside me. “If you say so,” I replied, and then headed for the exit, realizing that for me such things only provoke my rage against a world that applauds trumped-up illusions while denying or demeaning those that create the very lives they are living. No *real* illusion will ever gain their favor, or even their attention. They would rather be bound inside a heavy chest wrapped with chains and thrown into the deepest waters. As would I.

November 1, 189—

From the earliest days of human life there have existed persons, almost all of us in fact, who hold that the visible

world is only a mere mote in the totality of being. Everything we witness is thereby translated into an indicator of an unseen order of being that expresses itself by means of the gross materials we perceive with our senses. Hence, it may seem that a tree is not a tree but a signpost to another realm, a spectral thing full of strange suggestion; that a house is not a house but a threshold by which we may pass into another home, one more suited to our nameless yearnings; that an empty street at twilight may intimate another side of existence, one that complements this side of things and consoles us for its imperfections.

But is there really another world that overshadows ours? Who can say, and why should we care? We might just as truly claim that worlds which seem resistant to our sensory detection are but parasites of the only mystery there is—our own lives. That we benefit by our unknowingness is not an uncommon idea. It is also not a welcome notion to those who would believe our destiny to be presided over by invisible powers. This is the suspicion we must never attempt to verify: that the whole of creation might best be pictured as an untenanted room filled with the echoes of nothingness. Why should this condition, this intimation of the unreal, be insufficient for our spiritual requirements?

January 1, 189—

There is a solitary truth which, whether for good or ill I don't know, cannot be expressed on this earth. This is very strange, since everything—outward scenes as much as inward ones—suggests this truth and like some fantastic game of charades is always trying to coax the secret into the open. The eyes of certain crudely fashioned dolls are especially suggestive. And distant laughter. In rare moments I feel my-

self very close to setting it down in my journal, just as I would any other revelation. It would only be a few sentences, I'm sure. But whenever I feel them beginning to take shape in my mind, the page before me will not welcome my pen. Afterward I become fatigued with my failure and suffer headaches that may last for days. At these times I also tend to see odd things reflected in windows. Even after a full week has passed I may continue to wake up in the middle of the night, the semidarkness of my room faintly reverberant with a voice that cries out to me from nowhere.

March 30, 190—

Out of sheer inattentiveness I had stared at my reflection in the mirror a little too deeply. I should say that this mirror has been hanging in my room for more years, I would guess, than I have been on this earth. It's no surprise, then, that sooner or later it would get the edge on me. Up to a certain point there were no problems to speak of: there were only my eyes, my nose, my mouth, and that was that. But then it began to seem that those eyes were regarding me, rather than I them; that that mouth was about to speak of things outside of my knowledge. Finally, I realized that an entirely different creature was hiding behind my face, making it wholly unrecognizable to me. Let me say that I spent considerable time reshaping my reflection into what it should be.

Later, when I was out walking, I stopped dead on the street. Ahead of me, standing beneath a lamp hanging from an old wall, was the outline of a figure of my general size and proportions. He was looking the other way but very stiffly and very tense, as if waiting anxiously for the precise moment when he would suddenly twist about-face. If that should happen, I knew what I would see: my eyes, my nose,

my mouth, and behind those features a being strange beyond all description. I retraced my steps back home and went immediately to bed.

But I couldn't sleep. All night long a greenish glow radiated from the mirror in triumph.

No Date

I had just finished a book in which there is an old town strung with placid meandering canals. I closed the book and went over to the window. This is an old town, if medieval may be thought old, strung with placid meandering canals. The town depicted in the book is often enwrapped in mist. This town is often enwrapped in mist. The book's town has close crumbling houses, odd arching bridges, innumerable church towers, and narrow twisting streets that end in queer little courtyards. So has this one, needless to say. And the infinitely hollow bells in that book, tolling the arrival of each lambent morning and sullen twilight, is the same as your sounding bells, my adorable little town. Thus, I pass easily between one town and the other, pleasantly confusing them.

Oh my storybook town, how privileged I have been to suffer a few brief chapters in your sumptuous history of decay. I have studied your most obscure passages and found them as dark as the waters of your canals.

My town, my storybook, myself—how long we have held on! But it seems we will have to make up for this endurance and each, in our turn, must disappear. Every brick of yours, every bone of mine, every word in our book... everything gone forever. Everything, perhaps, except the sound of those bells haunting an empty mist through an eternal twilight.

The Journal Of J.P. Drapeau (1989 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

First published in *Dagon* #20, 1987

Introduction

It was late and we had been drinking. My friend, a poet who can become very exciteable at times, looked across the table at me. Then he revived a pet grievance of his as though I had not heard it all before.

“Where is the writer,” he began, “who is unstained by any habits of the human, who would be the ideal of everything alien to living, and whose own eccentricity, in its darkest phase, would turn in on itself to form increasingly more complex patterns of strangeness? Where is the writer who has remained his entire life in some remote dream that he inhabited from his day of birth, if not long before? Where is the writer from some mist-shrouded backwater of the earth—the city of Bruges itself, that withered place which some dreamer has described as ‘a sumptuous corpse of the Middle Ages that sings to itself from innumerable bell-towers and lays bony bridges across the black veins of its old canals.’

“But perhaps our writer's home would have to be an even older, more decaying Bruges in some farther, more obscure Flanders... the one envisioned by Breughel and by Ensor. Where is the writer who was begotten by two passionate

masks in the course of those macabre festivities called *kermesse*? Who was abandoned to develop his own way, left to a lonely evolution in shadowed streets and beside sluggish canals. Who was formed by the dreams around him as much as those within him, and who filled himself with strange learning. Where is this writer, the one whose entangled hallucinations could only be accommodated by the most intimate of diaries? And this diary, this journal of the most unnecessary man who ever lived, would be a record of the most questionable experiences ever known, and the most beautiful."

"Of course, there is no such writer," I replied. "But there's always Drapeau. Out of anyone I could name, he most nearly meets, if I may say, those rather *severe* prerequisites of yours. Living the whole of his life in Bruges, keeping those notebooks of his, and he—"

But my friend the poet only moaned in despair:

"Drapeau, always Drapeau."

Excerpts from the Journal

April 21, 189-

I have noticed that certain experiences are allowed to languish in the corners of life, are not allowed to *circulate* as freely as others. My own, for example. Since childhood, not one day has passed in which I have failed to hear *the music of the graveyards*. And yet, to my knowledge, never has another soul on earth made mention of this phenomenon. Is the circulation of the living so poor that it cannot carry these dead notes? It must be a mere trickle!

December 24,189-

Two tiny corpses, one male and the other female, live in that enormous closet in my bedroom. They are also very old, but still they are quick enough to hide themselves whenever I need to enter the closet to get something. I keep all my paraphernalia in there, stuffed into trunks or baskets and piled quite out of reach. I can't even see the floor or the walls any longer, and only if I hold a light high over my head can I study the layers of cobwebs floating about near the ceiling. After I close the door of the closet, its two miniature inhabitants resume their activities. Their voices are only faint squeaks which during the day hardly bother me at all. But sometimes I am kept awake far into the night by those interminable conversations of theirs.

May 21, 189-

After serving out the hours of a night in which sleep was absolutely forbidden, I went out for a walk. I had not gone far when I became spectator to a sad scene. Some yards ahead of me on the street, an old man was being forcibly led from a house by two other men. They had him in restraints and were delivering him to a waiting vehicle. Laughing hysterically, the man was apparently destined for the asylum. As the struggling trio reached the street, the eyes of the laughing man met my own. Suddenly he stopped laughing. Then, in a burst of resistance, he broke free of his escorts, ran toward me, and fell right into my arms. Since his own were tightly bound, I had to hold up his full weight.

“Never tell them what it means,” he said frantically, almost weeping.

“How can I tell them what I don't know?”

“Swear!” he demanded.

But by then his pursuers had caught up with him. As they dragged him off he began laughing just as before, and the peals of his laughter, in the early morning quiet, were soon devoured by the pealing of several church bells. Poor lunatic. This was one of the most malignant conspiracies I had ever witnessed; the bells, I mean. (They are everywhere.) This was also what made me decide that I had better keep the madman's secret after all.

August 1, 189-

As a child I maintained some very strange notions. For instance, I used to believe that during the night, while I slept, witches and monkeys removed parts of my body and played games with them, hiding my arms and legs, rolling my head across the floor. Of course I abandoned this belief as soon as I entered school, but not until much later did I discover the truth about it. After assimilating many facts from various sources and allowing them to mingle in my mind, I realized something. It happened one night as I was crossing a bridge that stretched over a narrow canal. (This was in a part of town fairly distant from where I live.) Pausing for a moment, as I usually do when crossing one of these bridges, I gazed not down into the darkwaters of the canal, as I also usually do, but upwards through the branches of overhanging trees. It was those stars, I knew that now: certain of them had been promised specific parts of my body; in the darkest hours of the night, when one is unusually sensitive to such things, I could—and still can, though just barely—feel the force of these stars tugging away at various points, eager for the moment of my death when each of them might carry off that part of me which is theirs by right. Of course a child

would misinterpret this experience. And how often I have found that every superstition has its basis in truth.

October 9,189-

Last night I visited one of the little theaters and stood at the back for a while. Onstage was a magician, shiny black hair parted straight down the middle, with full prestidigitatorial regalia about him: a long box to his left (moon and stars), a tall box to his right (oriental designs), and before him a low table covered with a red velvet cloth littered with diverse objects. The audience, a full house, applauded wildly after each illusion. At one point the magician divided the various sections of his assistant into separate boxes, which he then proceeded to move to distant areas of the stage, while the dismembered hands and feet continued to wiggle about and a decapitated head laughed loudly. The audience was at great pains to express its amusement. “Isn't it incredible!” exclaimed a man standing beside me. “If you say so,” I replied, and then headed for the exit, realizing that for me such things simply do not hold much interest.

November 1,189-

From the earliest days of man there has endured the convictions that there is an order of existence which is entirely strange to him. It does indeed seem that the strict order of the visible world is only a semblance, one providing certain gross materials which become the basis for subtle *improvisations* of invisible powers. Hence, it may appear to some that a leafless tree is not a tree but a signpost to another realm; that an old house is not a house but a thing possessing a will of its own; that the dead may throw off that heavy blanket of

earth to walk in their sleep, and in ours. And these are merely a few of the infinite variations on the themes of the natural order as it is usually conceived.

But is there *really* a strange world? Of course. Are there, then, two worlds? Not at all. There is only our own world and it alone is alien to us, intrinsically so by virtue of its lack of mysteries. If only it actually were deranged by invisible powers, if only it were susceptible to *real* strangeness, perhaps it would seem more like a home to us, and less like an empty room filled with the echoes of this dreadful improvising. To think that we might have found comfort in a world suited to our nature, only to end up in one so resoundly strange!

January 1,189-

There is a solitary truth which, whether for good or ill I don't know, cannot yet be expressed on this earth. This is very strange, since everything—outward scenes as much as inward ones—suggests this truth and like some fantastic game of charades is always trying to coax the secret into the open. The eyes of certain crudely fashioned dolls are especially suggestive. And distant laughter. In rare moments I feel myself very close to setting it down in my journal, just as I would any other revelation. It would only be a few sentences, I'm sure. But whenever I feel them beginning to take shape in my mind, the page before me will not welcome my pen. Afterward I become fatigued with my failure and suffer headaches that may last for days. At these times I also tend to see odd things reflected in windows. Even after a full week has passed I may continue to wake up in the middle of

the night, the silence of my room faintly vibrant with a voice that cries out to me from another universe.

March 30, 190-

Out of sheer absent-mindedness I had stared at my reflection in the mirror a little too deeply. I should say that that mirror has been hanging from that wall for more years, I would guess, than I have been on this earth. It's no surprise, then, that sooner or later it should get the edge on me. Up to a certain point there were no problems to speak of: there were only my eyes, my nose, my mouth, and that was that. But then it began to seem that those eyes were regarding me, rather than I them; that that mouth was about to speak things I had no notion of. Finally, I realized that an entirely different creature was hiding behind my face, making it wholly unrecognizable to me. Let me say that I spent considerable time reshaping my reflection into what it should be.

Later, when I was out walking, I stopped dead on the street. Ahead of me, standing beneath a lamp hanging from an old wall, was the outline of a figure of my general size and proportions. He was looking the other way but very stiffly and very tense, as if waiting anxiously for the precise moment when he would suddenly twist about-face. If that should happen, I knew what I would see: my eyes, my nose, my mouth and behind those features a being strange beyond all description. I retraced my steps back home and went immediately to bed.

But I could not sleep. All night long a greenish glow radiated from the mirror in triumph.

No Date

I had just finished a book [Possibly the novel Bruges-la-morte (1892) by Georges Rodenbach. (T.L.)] in which there is an old town strung with placid meandering canals. I closed the book and went over to the window. This is an old town, if medieval counts as old, strung with placid meandering canals. The town in the book is often mist shrouded. This town is often mist shrouded. That town has close crumbling houses, odd arching bridges, innumerable church towers, and narrow twisting streets that end in queer little courtyards. So has this one, needless to say. And the infinitely hollow sounding of the bells in the book, at early morning and sullen twilight, is the same as your sounding bells, my lovely town. Thus, I pass easily between one town and the other, pleasantly confusing them.

O my storybook town, strange as death itself, I have made your mysteries mine, mine yours, and have suffered a few brief chapters in your sumptuous history of decay. I have studied your most obscure passages and found them as dark as the waters of your canals.

My town, my storybook, myself, how long we have held on! But it seems we will have to make up for this endurance and each, in our turn, will disappear. Every brick of yours, every bone of mine, every word in our book— everything gone forever. Everything, perhaps, except the sound of those bells, haunting an empty mist through an eternal twilight.

The Mystics Of Muelenburg (2011 Grimscribe Version)

First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu* #51, 1987

If things are not what they seem—and we are forever reminded that this is the case—then it must also be observed that enough of us ignore this truth to keep the world from collapsing. Though never exact, always shifting somewhat, the *proportion* is crucial. For a certain number of minds are fated to depart for realms of delusion, as if in accordance with some hideous timetable, and many will never be returning to us. Even among those who remain, how difficult it can be to hold the focus sharp, to keep the picture of the world from fading, from blurring in selected zones and, on occasion, from sustaining epic deformations over the entire visible scene.

I once knew a man who claimed that, overnight, all the solid shapes of existence had been replaced by cheap substitutes: trees made of poster board, houses built of colored foam, whole landscapes composed of hair-clippings. His own flesh, he said, was now just so much putty. Needless to add, this acquaintance had deserted the cause of appearances and could no longer be depended on to stick to the common story. Alone he had wandered into a tale of another sort altogether; for him, all things now participated in this nightmare of nonsense. But although his revelations conflicted with the lesser forms of truth, nonetheless he did live in the light of a greater truth: that all is unreal. Within him this

knowledge was vividly present down to his very bones, which had been newly simulated by a compound of mud and dust and ashes.

In my own case, I must confess that the myth of a natural universe—that is, one that adheres to certain continuities whether we wish them or not—was losing its grip on me and gradually being supplanted by a hallucinatory view of creation. Forms, having nothing
to offer except a mere suggestion of firmness, declined in importance; fantasy, that misty domain of pure meaning, gained in power and influence. This was in the days when esoteric wisdom seemed to count for something in my mind, and I would willingly have sacrificed a great deal in its pursuit. Hence, my interest in the man who called himself Klaus Klingman; hence, too, that brief yet profitable association between us, which came about through channels too twisted to recall.

Without a doubt, Klingman was one of the illuminati and proved this many times over in various psychic experiments, particularly those of the seance type. In this regard, I need only mention the man who was severally known as Nemo the Necromancer, Marlowe the Magus, and Master Marinetti, each of whom was none other than Klaus Klingman himself. But Klingman's highest achievement was not a matter of public spectacle and consisted entirely of this private triumph that he had attained, by laborious effort, an unwavering acceptance of the spectral nature of things, which to him were neither what they seemed to be nor were they quite anything at all.

Klingman lived in the enormous upper story of a warehouse that had been part of his family's legacy to him, and

there I often found him wandering amidst a few pieces of furniture and the cavernous wasteland of dim and empty storage space. Collapsing into an ancient armchair, reposing far beneath crumbling rafters, he would gaze beyond the physical body of his visitor, his eyes surveying remote worlds and his facial expression badly disorganized by dreams and large quantities of alcohol. “Fluidity, always fluidity,” he shouted out, his voice carrying through the expansive haze around us, which muted daylight into dusk. The embodiment of his mystic precepts, he appeared at any given moment to be on the verge of an amazing disintegration, his particular complex of atoms ready to go shooting off into the great void like a burst of fireworks.

We discussed the dangers—for me and for the world—of adopting a visionary program of existence. “The chemistry of things is so delicate,” he warned. “And this word *chemistry*. What does it mean but a mingling, a mixing, a gushing together? These are things that people fear.”

Indeed, I had already suspected the hazards of Klingman's company, and, as the sun was setting over the city beyond the great windows of the warehouse, I became afraid. With an uncanny perception of my feelings, Klingman pointed at me and bellowed: “The worst fear of the race—yes, the world suddenly transformed into a senseless nightmare, horrible dissolution of things. Nothing compares, even oblivion is a sweet dream. You understand why, of course. Why this peculiar threat. These brooding psyches, all the busy minds everywhere. I hear them buzzing like flies in the blackness. I see them as glow worms flitting in the blinding sun. They are struggling, straining every second to keep the sky above them, to keep the sun in the sky, to keep the dead in the

earth—to keep all things, so to speak, *where they belong*. What an undertaking! What a crushing task! Is it any wonder that they are all tempted by a universal vice, that in some dark street of the mind a single voice whispers to one and all, softly hissing, and says: 'Lay down your burden.' Then thoughts begin to drift, a mystical magnetism pulls them this way and that, faces start to change, shadows speak. And sooner or later the sky comes down, melting like wax. But as you know, everything has not yet been lost: absolute terror has proved its security against this fate. Is it any wonder that these beings carry on the struggle at whatever cost?"

"And you?" I asked.

"I?"

"Yes, don't you shoulder the universe in your own way?"

"Not at all," he replied, smiling and sitting up in his chair as on a throne. "I am a lucky one, parasite of chaos, maggot of vice. Where I live is all nightmare, thus a certain nonchalance. I am accustomed to drifting in the delirium of history. And by *history* I include events, and even whole eras, that have never gone on record. Speaking with the dead can be so instructive. They remember what the living have forgotten, or would not know if they could. The true frailty of things. What happened in the old town of Muelenburg, for example. Now *there* was an opportunity, a moment of distraction in which so much was nearly lost forever, so many lost in that medieval gloom, catastrophe of dreams. How their minds wandered in the shadows even as their bodies were seemingly bound to narrow rutted streets and apparently safeguarded by the spired cathedral which was erected between 1365 and 1399. A rare and fortuitous juncture when the bur-

den of the heavens was heaviest—so much to keep in its place—and the psyche so ill-developed, so easily taxed and tempted away from its labors. But they knew nothing about that, and never could. They only knew the prospect of absolute terror."

Klingman smiled, then began giggling, his mind obviously turning inward to converse with itself. Hoping to draw his conversation outward, I said. "Mr. Klingman, you were speaking about Muelenburg. You said something about the cathedral."

"I *see* the cathedral, the colossal vault above, the central aisle stretching out before us. The woodcarvings leer down from dark corners, animals and freaks, men in the mouths of demons. Are you taking notes again? Fine, then take notes. Who knows what you will remember of all this? Or if memory will help you at all? In any case we are already there, sitting among the smothered sounds of the cathedral. Beyond the jeweled windows is the town in twilight."

Twilight, as Klingman explained, had come upon Muelenburg somewhat prematurely on a certain day deep into the autumn season. Early that afternoon, clouds had spread themselves evenly above the region surrounding the town, withholding heaven's light and giving a dull appearance to the landscape of forests, thatched farmhouses, and windmills standing still against the horizon. Within the high stone walls of Muelenburg itself, no one seemed particularly troubled that the narrow streets—normally so cluttered with the pointed shadows of peaked roofs and jutting gables at this time of day—were still immersed in a lukewarm dimness which turned merchants' brightly colored signs into faded artifacts of a dead town and which made faces look as

if they were fashioned of pale clay. And in the central square —where the shadow from the clock-tower of the town hall at times overlapped those cast by the twin spires of the cathedral on the one hand, or the ones from high castle turrets looming at the border of the town on the other—there was only grayness undisturbed.

Where were the minds of the townspeople? How had they ceased paying homage to the ancient order of things? And when had the severing taken place that set their world adrift on strange waters?

For some time they remained innocent of the disaster, going about their ways as the ashen twilight lingered far too long, as it encroached upon the hours that belonged to evening and suspended the town between day and night. Everywhere windows began to glow with the yellow light of lamps, creating the illusion that darkness was imminent. Any moment, it seemed, the natural cycle would relieve the town of the prolonged dusk it had suffered that autumn day. How well-received the blackness would have been by those who waited silently in sumptuous chambers or humble rooms, for no one could bear the sight of Muelenburg's twisting streets in that eerie, overstaying twilight. Even the night watchman shirked his nocturnal routine. And when the bells of the abbey sounded for the monks' midnight prayers, each toll spread like an alarm throughout the town still held in the strange luminousness of the gloaming.

Exhausted by fear, many shuttered their windows, extinguished lamps, and retired to their beds, hoping that all would be made right in the interval. Others sat up with a candle, enjoying the lost luxury of shadows. A few, being itinerants who were not fixed to the life of the town, broke

through the unwatched gate and took to the roads, all the while gazing at the pale sky and wondering where they would go.

Whether they kept the hours in their dreams or in sleepless vigils, all of Muelenburg's citizens were disturbed by something in the spaces around them, as if some strangeness had seeped into the atmosphere of their town, their homes, and perhaps their souls. The air seemed heavier somehow, resisting them slightly, and also seemed to be flowing with things that could not be perceived except as swift, shadow-like movement escaping all sensible recognition, transparent flight which barely caressed one's vision.

When the clock high in the tower of the town hall proved that a nightful of hours had passed, some opened their shutters, even ventured into the streets. But the sky still hovered over them like an infinite vault of glowing dust. Here and there throughout the town the people began to gather in whispering groups. Appeals were soon made at the castle and the cathedral, and speculations were offered to calm the crowd. There was a struggle in heaven, some had reasoned, which had influenced the gross reality of the visible world. Others proposed a deception by demons or an ingenious punishment from on high. Certain persons met secretly in well-hidden chambers and spoke in stricken voices of old deities formerly driven from the earth who were now monstrously groping their way back. And all of these explications of the mystery were true in their own way, though none could abate the dread which had settled upon the town of Muelenburg.

Submerged in unvarying grayness, distracted and confused by phantasmal intrusions about them, the people of

the town felt their world dissolving. Even the clock in the town hall tower failed to keep their moments from wandering strangely. Within such disorder were bred curious thoughts and actions. Thus, in the garden of the abbey an ancient tree was shunned and rumors spread concerning some change in its twisted silhouette, something flaccid and ropelike about its branches, until finally the monks doused it with oil and set it aflame, their circle of squinting faces bathing in the glare. Likewise, a fountain standing in one of the castle's most secluded courtyards became notorious when its waters appeared to suggest fabulous depths far beyond the natural dimensions of its shell-shaped basin. The cathedral itself had deteriorated into a hollow sanctuary where prayers were mocked by queer movements among the carved figures in cornices and by shadows streaming horribly in the twitching light of a thousand candles.

Throughout the town, all places and things bore evidence to striking revisions in the base realm of matter: precisely sculptured stone began to loosen and lump, an abandoned cart melded with the sucking mud of the street, and objects in desolate rooms lost themselves in the surfaces they pressed upon, making metal tongs mix with brick hearth, prismatic jewels with lavish velvet, a corpse with the wood of its coffin. At last the faces of Muelenburg became subject to changing expressions which at first were quite subtle, though later these divergences were so exaggerated that it was no longer possible to recapture original forms. It followed that the townspeople could no more recognize themselves than they could one another. All were carried off in the great torrent of their dreams, all spinning in that grayish

whirlpool of indefinite twilight, all churning and in the end merging into utter blackness.

It was within this blackness that the souls of Muelenburg struggled and labored and ultimately awoke. The stars and high moon now lit up the night, and it seemed that their town had been returned to them. And so terrible had been their recent ordeal that of its beginning, its progress, and its termination, they could remember… nothing.

"Nothing?" I echoed.

"Of course," Klingman answered. "All of those terrible memories were left behind in the blackness. How could they bear to bring them back?"

"But your story," I protested. "These notes I've taken tonight."

"What did I tell you? Privileged information, confidences spoken off the historical record. You know that sooner or later each of the souls who occupied Muelenburg recollected the episode in detail. It was all waiting for them in the place where they had left it—the blackness which is the domain of death."

I remembered the necromantic learning that Klingman had professed and to which I gave no small credence. But this was too much. "Then nothing can be verified, nothing you can produce to back up your story. I thought you might at least conjure a spirit or two. You've never disappointed me before."

"Nor will I disappoint you tonight. Remember, I am one with the dead of Muelenburg… and with all who have known the great dream in all its true liquescence. They have spoken to me as I am speaking to you. Many reminiscences

imparted by those old dreamers, many drunken dialogues I have held with them."

"Like the drunkenness of this dialogue tonight," I said, openly disdaining his narrative.

"Perhaps, only much more vivid, more real. But the yarn which you suppose I have merely spun has served its purpose. To cure you of doubt, you first had to be made a doubter. Until now, pardon my saying so, you have shown no talent in that direction. You believed every wild thing that came along, provided it had the least evidence whatever. Unparalleled credulity. But tonight you have doubted and thus you are ready to be cured of this doubt. And didn't I mention time and again the dangers? Unfortunately, you cannot count yourself among those forgetful souls of Muelenburg. You even have your mnemonic notes, as if anyone will credit them when this night is over. This is my gift to you. This will be your enlightenment. For the time is right again for the return of fluidity, and for the world's grip to go slack. And later so much will have to be washed away, assuming a renascence of things. Fluidity, always fluidity."

When I left his company that night, abandoning the dead and shapeless hours I had spent in that warehouse, Klingman was laughing like a madman. I remember him slouched in that threadbare throne, his face flushed and twisted, his mouth wailing at some hilarious arcana known only to himself. To all appearances, some ultimate phase of dissipation had seized his soul.

Nevertheless, that I had underrated or misunderstood the power of Klaus Klingman was soon demonstrated to me, though I wish it had not been. But no one else remembers that time when the night would not leave and no dawn ap-

peared to be forthcoming. During the early part of the crisis there were sensible, rather than apocalyptic, explanations proffered everywhere: blackout, bizarre meteorological phenomena, an eclipse of sorts. Later, these myths became useless and ultimately unnecessary. As we had done before, we once again returned to this flimsy world—this world I must now view as a mere vapor of spectral manifestations, appearances cast out of emptiness, an ornamented void. As Klingman had promised, my enlightenment would be a lonely one.

For no one else recalls the hysteria that prevailed when the stars and the moon dimmed into blackness. Nor can they summon the least memory of when the artificial illumination of this earth turned weak and lurid, and all the shapes we once knew contorted into nightmares and nonsense. And finally how the blackness grew viscous, enveloping what light remained and drawing us into itself. How many such horrors await in that blackness to be restored to the legions of the dead. For no one else living remembers when everything began to change, no one else with the exception of Klaus Klingman and myself.

In the red dawn following that gruesomely protracted night, I went to the warehouse. Unfortunately the place was untenanted, save by its spare furnishings and a few empty bottles. Klingman had disappeared, perhaps into that same blackness for which he seemed to have an incredible nostalgia. I, of course, make no appeals for belief. There can be no belief where there is no doubt. This is far from secret knowledge, as if such knowledge could change anything. This is only how it seems, and seeming is everything.

The Mystics Of Muelenburg (1991 Grimscribe Version)

First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu* #51, 1987

If things are not what they seem—and we are forever reminded that this is the case—then it must also be observed that enough of us ignore this truth to keep the world from collapsing. Though never exact, always shifting somewhat, the *proportion* is crucial. For a certain number of minds are incessantly departing for realms of delusion, as if in accordance with some hideous timetable, and many will never be returning to us. Even among those who remain, how difficult it can be to hold the focus sharp, to keep the picture of the world from fading, from blurring in selected zones, or even from sustaining epic deformations upon the entire visible scene.

I once knew a man who claimed that, overnight, all the solid shapes of existence had been replaced by cheap substitutes: trees made of flimsy posterboard, houses built of colored foam, whole landscapes composed of hair-clippings. His own flesh, he said, was now just so much putty. Needless to add, this acquaintance had deserted the cause of appearances and could no longer be depended on to stick to the common story. Alone he had wandered into a tale of another sort altogether; for him, all things now participated in this nightmare of nonsense. But although his revelations conflicted with the lesser forms of truth, nonetheless he did live in the light of a greater truth: that all is unreal. Within him

this knowledge was vividly present down to his very bones, which had been newly simulated by a compound of mud and dust and ashes.

In my own case, I must confess that the myth of a natural universe—that is one that adheres to certain continuities whether we wish them or not—was losing its grip on me and was gradually being supplanted by a hallucinatory view of creation. Forms, having nothing to offer except a mere suggestion of firmness, declined in importance; fantasy, that misty domain of pure meaning, gained in power and influence. This was in the days when esoteric wisdom seemed to count for something in my mind, and I would willingly have sacrificed a great deal to attain it. Hence, my interest in the man who called himself Klaus Klingman; hence, too, that brief yet profitable association between us, which came about through channels too twisted to recall.

Without a doubt, Klingman was one of the illuminati and proved this many times over in various psychic experiments, particularly those of the seance type. For those outside scientific circles, I need only mention the man who was alternately known as the Master of Magi, Mandarin of Magic and Nemo the Necromancer, each of whom was none other than Klaus Klingman himself. But Klingman's highest achievement was not a matter of public spectacle and consisted entirely of this private triumph: that he had achieved, by laborious effort, an unwavering acceptance of the spectral nature of things, which to him were neither what they seemed to be nor were they quite anything at all.

Klingman lived in the enormous upper story of a warehouse that had been part of his family's legacy to him, and there I often found him wandering amidst a few pieces of

furniture and the cavernous wasteland of dim and empty storage space. Collapsing into an ancient armchair, far beneath crumbling rafters, he would gaze through and beyond the physical body of his visitor, his eyes surveying remote worlds and his facial expression badly disorganized by dreams and large quantities of alcohol. "Fluidity, always fluidity," he shouted out, his voice carrying through the expansive haze around us, which muted daylight into dusk. The embodiment of his mystic precepts, he appeared at any given moment to be on the verge of an amazing disintegration, his peculiar complex of atoms shooting off into the great void like a burst of fireworks.

We discussed the dangers—for me and for the world—of adopting a visionary program of existence. "The chemistry of things is so delicate," he warned. "And this word chemistry, what does it mean but a mingling, a mixing, a gushing together? Things that people fear." Indeed, I had already suspected the hazards of his company, and, as the sun was setting over the city beyond the great windows of the warehouse, I became afraid. With an uncanny perception of my feelings, Klingman pointed at me and bellowed:

"The worst fear of the race yes, the world suddenly transformed into a senseless nightmare, horrible dissolution of things. Nothing compares, even oblivion is a sweet dream. You understand why, of course. Why this peculiar threat. These brooding psyches, all the busy minds everywhere. I hear them buzzing like flies in the blackness. I see them as glow worms flitting in the blackness. They are struggling, straining every second to keep the sky above them, to keep the moon in the sky, to keep the dead in the earth—to keep all things, so to speak, *where they belong*. What an undertak-

ing! What a crushing task! Is it any wonder that they are all tempted by a universal vice, that in some dark street of the mind a single voice whispers to one and all, softly hissing, and says: 'Lay down your burden.' Then thoughts begin to drift, a mystical magnetism pulls them this way and that, faces start to change, shadows speak... sooner or later the sky comes down, melting like wax. But as you know, everything has not yet been lost: absolute terror has proved its security against this fate. Is it any wonder that these beings carry on the struggle at whatever cost?"

"And you?" I asked.

"I?"

"Yes, don't you shoulder the universe in your own way?"

"Not at all," he replied, smiling and sitting up in his chair as on a throne. "I am a lucky one, parasite of chaos, maggot of vice. Where I live is a nightmare, thus a certain nonchalance. In a previous life, you know, I may actually have been at Muelenburg before it was lost in the delirium of history. Who can say? Smothered by centuries now. But t*here* was an opportunity, a moment of distraction in which so much was nearly lost forever, so many lost in that medieval gloom, catastrophe of dreams. How their minds wandered in the shadows when their bodies seemed bound to narrow, rutted streets and the spired cathedral erected 1375 to 1399. A rare and fortuitous juncture when the burden of the heavens was heaviest—so much to keep in its place—and the psyche so ill-developed, so easily taxed and tempted away from its labors. But they knew nothing about that, and never could. They only knew the prospect of absolute terror."

"In Muelenburg", I said, hoping to draw his conversation outward before it twisted further into itself. "You said the

cathedral. “

“I *see* the cathedral, the colossal vault above, the central aisle stretching out before us. The woodcarvings leer down from dark corners, animals and freaks, men in the mouths of demons. Are you taking notes again? Fine, then take notes. Who knows what you will remember of all this? Or will memory help you at all? In any case we are already there, sitting among the smothered sounds of the cathedral. Beyond the jeweled windows is the town in twilight.”

Twilight, as Klingman explained and I must paraphrase, had come upon Muelenburg somewhat prematurely on a certain day deep into the autumn season. Early that afternoon, clouds had spread themselves evenly above the region surrounding the town, withholding heaven's light and giving a dull appearance to the landscape of forests, thatched farmhouses, and windmills standing still against the horizon. Within the high stone walls of Muelenburg itself, no one seemed particularly troubled that the narrow streets—normally so cluttered with the pointed shadows of peaked roofs and jutting gables at this time of day—were still immersed in a lukewarm dimness which turned merchants’ brightly colored signs into faded artifacts of a dead town and which made faces look as if they were fashioned in pale clay. And in the central square—where the shadow from the clock-tower of the town hall at times overlapped those cast by the twin spires of the cathedral on the one hand, or the ones from high castle turrets looming at the border of the town on the other—there was only grayness undisturbed.

Now where were the minds of the townspeople? How had they ceased paying homage to the ancient order of things?

And when had the severing taken place that sent their world drifting on strange waters?

For some time they remained innocent of the disaster, going about their ways as the ashen twilight lingered far too long, as it encroached upon the hours that belonged to evening and suspended the town between day and night. Everywhere windows began to glow with the yellow light of lamps, creating the illusion that darkness was imminent. Any moment, it seemed, the natural cycle would relieve the town of the prolonged dusk it had suffered that autumn day. How well-received the blackness would have been by those who waited silently in sumptuous chambers or humble rooms, for no one could bear the sight of Muelenburg's twisting streets in that eerie, overstaying twilight. Even the nightwatchman shirked his nocturnal routine. And when the bells of the abbey sounded for the monks' midnight prayers, each toll spread like an alarm thoughout the town still held in the strange luminousness of the gloaming.

Exhausted by fear, many shuttered their windows, extinguished lamps, and retired to their beds, hoping that all would be made right in the interval. Others sat up with candles, enjoying the lost luxury of shadows. A few, who were not fixed to the life of the town, broke through the unwatched gate and took to the roads, all the while gazing at the pale sky and wondering where they would go.

But whether they kept the hours in their dreams or in sleepless vigils, all were disturbed by something in the spaces around them, as if some strangeness had seeped into the atmosphere of their town, their homes, and perhaps their souls. The air seemed heavier somehow, resisting them slightly, and also seemed to be flowing with things that could

not be perceived except as swift, shadowlike movement escaping all sensible recognition, transparent flight which barely caressed one's vision.

When the clock high in the tower of the town hall proved that a nightful of hours had passed, some opened their shutters, even ventured into the streets. But the sky still hovered over them like an infinite vault of glowing dust. Here and there throughout the town the people began to gather in whispering groups. Appeals were soon made at the castle and the cathedral, and speculations were offered to calm the crowd. There was a struggle in heaven, some had reasoned, which had influenced the gross reality of the visible world. Others proposed a deception by demons or an ingenious punishment from on high. A few, who met secretly in lurid chambers, spoke in stricken voices of old deities formerly driven from the earth who were now monstrously groping their way back. And all of these explications of the mystery were true in their own way, though none could abate the dread in the town of Muelenburg.

Submerged in unvarying grayness, distracted and confused by phantasmal intrusions about them, the people of the town felt their world dissolving, and even the clock in the town hall tower failed to keep their moments from wandering strangely. Within such disorder were bred curious thoughts and actions. Thus, in the garden of the abbey an ancient tree was shunned and rumours spread concerning some change in its twisted silhouette, something flaccid and ropelike about its branches, until finally the monks dowsed it with oil and set it aflame, their circle of squinting faces bathing in the glare. Likewise, a fountain standing in one of the castle's most secluded courtyards became notorious

when its waters appeared to suggest fabulous depths far beyond the natural dimensions of its shell-shaped basin. The cathedral itself had deteriorated into a hollow sanctuary where prayers were mocked by queer movements among the carved figures in cornices and by shadows streaming horribly in the twitching light of a thousand candles.

Throughout the town, all places and things bore evidence to striking revisions in the base realm of matter: precisely sculptured stone began to loosen and lump, an abandoned cart melded with the sucking mud of the street, and objects in desolate rooms lost themselves in the surfaces they pressed upon, making metal tongs mix with brick hearth, prismatic jewels with lavish velvet, a corpse with the wood of its coffin. At last the faces of Muelenburg became subject to changing expressions which at first were quite subtle, though later these divergences were so exaggerated that it was no longer possible to recapture original forms. It followed that the townspeople could no more recognize themselves than they could one another. All were carried off in the great torrent of their dreams, all spinning in that grayish whirlpool of indefinite twilight, all churning and in the end merging into utter blackness.

It was within this blackness that the souls of Muelenburg struggled and labored and ultimately awoke. The stars and high moon now lit up the night, and it seemed that their town had been returned to them. And so terrible had been their recent ordeal that of its beginning, its progress, and its termination, they could remember… nothing.

“Nothing?” I echoed.

“Of course,” Klingman answered. “All the rest was left behind in the blackness. How could they bear to bring it back

with them?"

"But your story," I protested. "These notes I've taken tonight."

"Privileged information, far off the main roads of historical record. You know that sooner or later each of them recollected the episode in detail. It was all waiting for them in the place where they had left it—the blackness which is the realm of death. Or that blackness of the old alchemists' magic powder, if you wish."

I remembered the necromantic learning that Klingman had both professed and proven, but still I observed: "Then nothing can be verified, nothing established as fact."

"Nothing at all," he agreed, "except the fact that I am one with the dead of Muelenburg and with all who have known the great dream in all its true liquescence. They have spoken to me as I am speaking to you. Many drunken dialogues have been held, many reminiscences from those old dreamers."

"Like the drunkenness of this dialogue tonight," I said, openly disdaining his narrative.

"Perhaps, only much more vivid, more real. But the yarn which you suppose I alone have spun has served its purpose. To cure you of doubt, you first had to be made a doubter. Until now, pardon my saying so, you have shown no talent in that direction. You believed every wild thing that came along, provided it had the least evidence whatever. Tonight you are ready to be cured of this paradoxical doubt. And didn't I mention time and again the dangers? Unfortunately, you cannot count yourself among those forgetful souls of Muelenburg. You even have your mnemonic notes, as if anyone will credit them when this night is over. The time is right again, and it has happened more than once, for the

grip to go slack and for the return of fluidity in the world. And later so much will have to be washed away, assuming a renaissance of things. Fluidity, always fluidity. “

When I left his company that night, abandoning the dead and shapeless hours I had spent in that warehouse, Klingman was laughing like a madman. I remember him slouched in that threadbare throne, his face all flushed and contorted, his twisted mouth wailing at some hilarious arcana known only to himself, the sardonic laughter reverberating in the great spaces of the night. To all appearances, some ultimate phase of dissipation had seized his soul.

Nevertheless, that I had underrated or misunderstood the powers of Klaus Klingman was soon demonstrated to me, and to others. But no one else remembers that time when the night would not leave and no dawn appeared to be forthcoming. During the early part of the crisis there were sensible, rather than apocalyptic, explanations proffered everywhere: blackout, bizarre meteorological phenomena, an eclipse of sorts. Later, these myths became useless and ultimately unnecessary.

For no one else recalls the hysteria that prevailed when the stars and the moon seemed to become swollen in the blackness and to cast a lurid illumination upon the world. How many horrors await in that blackness to be restored to the memories of the dead. For no one else living remembers when everything began to change, no one else with the possible exception of Klaus Klingman.

But Klingman has disappeared, perhaps into that same blackness for which he seemed to have an incredible nostalgia. (The warehouse, which I revisited in the red dawn following that gruesomely protracted night, was untenanted

save by its furnishings and a few empty bottles.) And I, of course, am not to be believed.

The Mystics Of Muelenburg (1987 Crypt Of Cthulhu Version)

Taken from *Crypt Of Cthulu* #51, 1987

If things are not what they seem—and we are forever reminded that this is the case—then it must also be observed that enough of us ignore this truth to keep the world from collapsing. Though never exact, always shifting somewhat, the *proportion* is crucial. For a certain number of minds are fated to depart for realms of delusion, as if in accordance with some hideous timetable, and many will never be returning to us. Even among those who remain, how difficult it can be to hold the focus sharp, to keep the picture of the world from fading, from blurring in selected zones and, on occasion, from sustaining epic deformations over the entire visible scene.

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ted with the lesser forms of truth, nonetheless he did live in the light of a greater truth: that all is unreal. Within him this knowledge was vividly present down to his very bones, which had been newly simulated by a compound of mud and dust and ashes.

In my own case, I must confess that the myth of a natural universe—that is one that adheres to certain continuities whether we wish them or not—was losing its grip on me and was gradually being supplanted by a hallucinatory view of creation. Forms, having nothing to offer except a mere suggestion of firmness, declined in importance; fantasy, that misty domain of pure meaning, gained in power and influence. This was in the days when esoteric wisdom seemed to count for something in my mind, and I would willingly have sacrificed a great deal in its pursuit. Hence, my interest in the man who called himself Klaus Klingman; hence, too, that brief yet profitable association between us, which came about through channels too twisted to recall.

Without a doubt, Klingman was one of the illuminati and proved this many times over in various psychic experiments, particularly those of the seance type. For those outside scientific circles, I need only mention the man who was severally known as Nemo the Necromancer, Marlowe the Magus, and Master Marinetti, each of whom was none other than Klaus Klingman himself. But Klingman's highest achievement was not a matter of public spectacle and consisted entirely of this private triumph: that he had attained, by laborious effort, an unwavering acceptance of the spectral nature of things, which to him were neither what they seemed to be nor were they quite anything at all.

Klingman lived in the enormous upper story of a warehouse that had been part of his family's legacy to him, and there I often found him wandering amidst a few pieces of furniture and the cavernous wasteland of dim and empty storage space. Collapsing into an ancient armchair, reposing far beneath crumbling rafters, he would gaze beyond the physical body of his visitor, his eyes surveying remote worlds and his facial expression badly disorganized by dreams and large quantities of alcohol. “Fluidity, always fluidity,” he shouted out, his voice carrying through the expansive haze around us, which muted daylight into dusk. The embodiment of his mystic precepts, he appeared at any given moment to be on the verge of an amazing disintegration, his particular complex of atoms ready to go shooting off into the great void like a burst of fireworks.

We discussed the dangers for me—and for the world—of adopting a visionary program of existence. “The chemistry of things is so delicate,” he warned. “And this word chemistry, what does it mean but a mingling, a mixing, a gushing together? Things that people fear.” Indeed, I had already suspected the hazards of his company, and, as the sun was setting over the city beyond the great windows of the warehouse, I became afraid. With an uncanny perception of my feelings, Klingman pointed at me and bellowed:

“The worst fear of the race yes, the world suddenly transformed into a senseless nightmare, horrible dissolution of things. Nothing compares, even oblivion is a sweet dream. You understand why, of course. Why this peculiar threat. These brooding psyches, all the busy minds everywhere. I hear them buzzing like flies in the blackness. I see them as glow worms flitting in the blackness. They are struggling,

straining every second to keep the sky above them, to keep the sun in the sky, to keep the dead in the earth—to keep all things, so to speak, where they belong. What an undertaking! What a crushing task! Is it any wonder that they are all tempted by a universal vice, that in some dark street of the mind a single voice whispers to one and all, softly hissing, and says: 'Lay down your burden.' Then thoughts begin to drift, a mystical magnetism pulls them this way and that, faces start to change, shadows speak... sooner or later the sky comes down, melting like wax. But as you know, everything has not yet been lost: absolute terror has proved its security against this fate. Is it any wonder that these beings carry on the struggle at whatever cost?"

"And you?" I asked.

"I?"

"Yes, don't you shoulder the universe in your own way?"

"Not at all," he replied, smiling and sitting up in his chair as on a throne. "I am a lucky one, parasite of chaos, maggot of vice. Where I live is nightmare, thus a certain nonchalance. In a previous life, you know, I may actually have been at Muelenburg before it was lost in the delirium of history. Who can say? Smothered by centuries now. But there was an opportunity, a moment of distraction in which so much was nearly lost forever, so many lost in that medieval gloom, catastrophe of dreams. How their minds wandered in the shadows even as their bodies were seemingly bound to narrow rutted streets and apparently safeguarded by the spired cathedral which was erected between 1365 and 1399. A rare and fortuitous juncture when the burden of the heavens was heaviest—so much to keep in its place—and the psyche so ill-developed, so easily taxed and tempted away from its labors.

But they knew nothing about that, and never could. They only knew the prospect of absolute terror."

"In Muelenburg", I said, hoping to draw his conversation outward before it twisted further into itself. "You said the cathedral. "

"I see the cathedral, the colossal vault above, the central aisle stretching out before us. The woodcarvings leer down from dark corners, animals and freaks, men in the mouths of demons. Are you taking notes again? Fine, then take notes. Who knows what you will remember of all this? Or will memory help you at all? In any case we are already there, sitting among the smothered sounds of the cathedral. Beyond the jeweled windows is the town in twilight."

Twilight, as Klingman explained and I must paraphrase, had come upon Muelenburg somewhat prematurely on a certain day deep into the autumn season. Early that afternoon, clouds had spread themselves evenly above the region surrounding the town, withholding heaven's light and giving a dull appearance to the landscape of forests, thatched farmhouses, and windmills standing still against the horizon. Within the high stone walls of Muelenburg itself, no one seemed particularly troubled that the narrow streets—normally so cluttered with the pointed shadows of peaked roofs and jutting gables at this time of day—were still immersed in a lukewarm dimness which turned merchants' brightly colored signs into faded artifacts of a dead town and which made faces look as if they were fashioned in pale clay. And in the central square—where the shadow from the clock-tower of the town hall at times overlapped those cast by the twin spires of the cathedral on the one hand, or the ones from high castle turrets looming at the border of the town on the

other—there was only grayness undisturbed. Where were the minds of the townspeople? How had they ceased paying homage to the ancient order of things? And when had the severing taken place that sent their world drifting on strange waters?

For some time they remained innocent of the disaster, going about their ways as the ashen twilight lingered far too long, as it encroached upon the hours that belonged to evening and suspended the town between day and night. Everywhere windows began to glow with the yellow light of lamps, creating the illusion that darkness was imminent. Any moment, it seemed, the natural cycle would relieve the town of the prolonged dusk it had suffered that autumn day. How well-received the blackness would have been by those who waited silently in sumptuous chambers or humble rooms, for no one could bear the sight of Muelenburg's twisting streets in that eerie, overstaying twilight. Even the nightwatchman shirked his nocturnal routine. And when the bells of the abbey sounded for the monks' midnight prayers, each toll spread like an alarm thoughout the town still held in the strange luminousness of the gloaming.

Exhausted by fear, many shuttered their windows, extinguished lamps, and retired to their beds, hoping that all would be made right in the interval. Others sat up with a candle, enjoying the lost luxury of shadows. A few, who were not fixed to the life of the town, broke through the unwatched gate and took to the roads, all the while gazing at the pale sky and wondering where they would go.

But whether they kept the hours in their dreams or in sleepless vigils, all were disturbed by something in the spaces around them, as if some strangeness had seeped into

the atmosphere of their town, their homes, and perhaps their souls. The air seemed heavier somehow, resisting them slightly, and also seemed to be flowing with things that could not be perceived except as swift, shadowlike movement escaping all sensible recognition, transparent flight which barely caressed one's vision.

When the clock high in the tower of the town hall proved that a nightful of hours had passed, some opened their shutters, even ventured into the streets. But the sky still hovered over them like an infinite vault of glowing dust. Here and there throughout the town the people began to gather in whispering groups. Appeals were soon made at the castle and the cathedral, and speculations were offered to calm the crowd. There was a struggle in heaven, some had reasoned, which had influenced the gross reality of the visible world. Others proposed a deception by demons or an ingenious punishment from on high. A few, who met secretly in well-hidden chambers, spoke in stricken voices of old deities formerly driven from the earth who were now monstrously groping their way back. And all of these explications of the mystery were true in their own way, though none could abate the dread which had settled upon the town of Muelenburg.

Submerged in unvarying grayness, distracted and confused by phantasmal intrusions about them, the people of the town felt their world dissolving. Even the clock in the town hall tower failed to keep their moments from wandering strangely. Within such disorder were bred curious thoughts and actions. Thus, in the garden of the abbey an ancient tree was shunned and rumours spread concerning some change in its twisted silhouette, something flaccid and

ropelike about its branches, until finally the monks dowsed it with oil and set it aflame, their circle of squinting faces bathing in the glare. Likewise, a fountain standing in one of the castle's most secluded courtyards became notorious when its waters appeared to suggest fabulous depths far beyond the natural dimensions of its shell-shaped basin. The cathedral itself had deteriorated into a hollow sanctuary where prayers were mocked by queer movements among the carved figures in cornices and by shadows streaming horribly in the twitching light of a thousand candles.

Throughout the town, all places and things bore evidence to striking revisions in the base realm of matter: precisely sculptured stone began to loosen and lump, an abandoned cart melded with the sucking mud of the street, and objects in desolate rooms lost themselves in the surfaces they pressed upon, making metal tongs mix with brick hearth, prismatic jewels with lavish velvet, a corpse with the wood of its coffin. At last the faces of Muelenburg became subject to changing expressions which at first were quite subtle, though later these divergences were so exaggerated that it was no longer possible to recapture original forms. It followed that the townspeople could no more recognize themselves than they could one another. All were carried off in the great torrent of their dreams, all spinning in that grayish whirlpool of indefinite twilight, all churning and in the end merging into utter blackness.

It was within this blackness that the souls of Muelenburg struggled and labored and ultimately awoke. The stars and high moon now lit up the night, and it seemed that their town had been returned to them. And so terrible had been

their recent ordeal that of its beginning, its progress, and its termination, they could remember... nothing.

"Nothing?" I echoed.

"Of course," Klingman answered. "All of those terrible memories were left behind in the blackness. How could they bear to bring them back?"

"But your story," I protested. "These notes I've taken tonight."

"Privileged information, far off the main roads of historical record. You know that sooner or later each of them recollected the episode in detail. It was all waiting for them in the place where they had left it—the blackness which is the domain of death. Or, if you wish, that blackness of the old alchemists' magic powder."

I remembered the necromantic learning that Klingman had both professed and proven, but still I observed: "Then nothing can be verified, nothing established as fact."

"Nothing at all," he agreed, "except the fact that I am one with the dead of Muelenburg and with all who have known the great dream in all its true liquescence. They have spoken to me as I am speaking to you. Many reminiscences imparted by those old dreamers, many drunken dialogues I have held with them."

"Like the drunkenness of this dialogue tonight," I said, openly disdaining his narrative.

"Perhaps, only much more vivid, more real. But the yarn which you suppose I alone have spun has served its purpose. To cure you of doubt, you first had to be made a doubter. Until now, pardon my saying so, you have shown no talent in that direction. You believed every wild thing that came along, provided it had the least evidence whatever. Unpar-

alleled credulity. But tonight you have doubted and thus you are ready to be cured of this doubt. And didn't I mention time and again the dangers? Unfortunately, you cannot count yourself among those forgetful souls of Muelenburg. You even have your mnemonic notes, as if anyone will credit them when this night is over. The time is right again, and it has happened more than once, for the grip to go slack and for the return of fluidity in the world. And later so much will have to be washed away, assuming a renascence of things. Fluidity, always fluidity. “

When I left his company that night, abandoning the dead and shapeless hours I had spent in that warehouse, Klingman was laughing like a madman. I remember him slouched in that threadbare throne, his face all flushed and contorted, his twisted mouth wailing at some hilarious arcana known only to himself, the sardonic laughter reverberating in the great spaces of the night. To all appearances, some ultimate phase of dissipation had seized his soul.

Nevertheless, that I had underrated or misunderstood the powers of Klaus Klingman was soon demonstrated to me, and to others. But no one else remembers that time when the night would not leave and no dawn appeared to be forthcoming. During the early part of the crisis there were sensible, rather than apocalyptic, explanations proffered everywhere: blackout, bizarre meteorological phenomena, an eclipse of sorts. Later, these myths became useless and ultimately unnecessary. For no one else recalls the hysteria that prevailed when the stars and the moon seemed to become swollen in the blackness and to cast a lurid illumination upon the world. How many horrors await in that blackness to be restored to the memories of the dead. For no one else

living remembers when everything began to change, no one else with the possible exception of Klaus Klingman.

In the red dawn following that gruesomely protracted night, I went to the warehouse. Unfortunately the place was untenanted, save by its spare furnishings and a few empty bottles. Klingman had disappeared, perhaps into that same blackness for which he seemed to have an incredible nostalgia. I, of course, make no appeals for belief. There can be no belief where there is no doubt. There cannot be something where there is no nothing. This is far from secret knowledge, as if such knowledge could change anything. This is only how it seems, and seeming is everything.

The Spectacles in the Drawer (2011 Grimscribe Version)

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Last year at this time, perhaps on this very day, Plomb visited me at my home. He always seemed to know when I had returned from my habitual traveling and always appeared uninvited on my doorstep. Although my former residence was pathetically run-down, Plomb seemed to regard it as a kind of palace of wonders, and he would gaze at its high ceilings and antiquated fixtures as if he saw some new glamour in them on each of his visits. That day—a dim one, I think—he did not fail to do the same. Then we settled into one of the spacious though sparsely furnished rooms of my house.

"And how were your travels?" he asked, as if only in the spirit of polite conversation. I could see by his smile—an emulation of my own, no doubt—that he was glad to be back in my house and in my company. I smiled too and stood up. Plomb, of course, stood up along with me, almost simultaneously with my own movements.

"Shall we go then?" I said. *What a pest*, I thought.

Our footsteps tapped a moderate time on the hard wooden floor leading to the stairway. We ascended to the second floor, which I left almost entirely empty, and then up a narrower stairway to the third floor. Although I had led him along this route several times before, I could see from his wandering eyes that, for him, every crack in the walls,

every cobweb fluttering in the corners above, every stale draft of the house composed a suspenseful prelude to our destination. At the end of the third-floor hall there was a small wooden stairway, no more than a ladder, that led to an old storeroom where I kept certain things which I collected.

It was not by any means a spacious room, and its enclosed atmosphere was *thickened*, as Plomb would have emphasized, by its claustrophobic arrangement of tall cabinets, ceiling-high shelves, and various trunks and crates. This is simply how matters worked out over a period of time. In any case, Plomb seemed to favor this state of affairs. “Ah, the room of secret mystery,” he said. “The chamber where all your hermetical prodigies are cached away.”

These treasures and marvels, as Plomb called them, were, I suppose, remarkable from a certain point of view. Plomb loved to go through my collection of curiosities, gathering together a lapful of exotic objects and settling down on the dusty sofa at the center of the room. But it was the new items, whenever I returned from one of my protracted tours, that always took precedence in Plomb's hierarchy of fascination. Thus, I immediately brought out the double-handled dagger with the single blade of polished stone. At first sight of the ceremonial object, Plomb held out the flat palms of his hands, and I placed this queer device upon its rightful altar. “Who could have made such a thing?” he asked, though rhetorically. He expected no answer to his questions and possibly did not really desire any. And of course I offered no more elaborate an explanation than a simple smile. But how quickly, I noticed on this occasion, the magic of that first token of my “tantalizing arcana,” as he would say, lost its initial surge of attraction. How fast that glistening fog, which

surrounded only Plomb, dispersed to unveil a tedious clarity. I had to move faster.

"Here," I said, my arm searching the shadows of an open wardrobe. "This should be worn when you handle that sacrificial artifact." And I threw the robe about his shoulders, engulfing his smallish frame with a cyclone of strange patterns and colors. He admired himself in the mirror attached inside the door of the wardrobe. "Look at the robe in the mirror," he practically shouted. "The designs are all turned around. How much stranger, how much better." While he stood there glaring at himself, I relieved him of the dagger before he had a chance to do something careless. This left his hands free to raise themselves up to the dust-caked ceiling of the room, and to the dark gods of his imagination. Gripping each handle of the dagger, I suddenly elevated it above his head, where I held it poised. In a few moments he started to giggle, and then fell into spasms of sardonic hilarity. He stumbled over to the old sofa and collapsed upon its soft cushions. I followed, but when I reached his prostrate form it was not the pale-blue blade that I brought down upon his chest—it was simply a book, one of many I had put before him. His peaked legs created a lectern on which he rested the huge volume, propping it securely as he began turning the stiff crackling pages. The sound seemed to absorb him as much as the sight of a language he could not even name let alone comprehend.

"The lost grimoire of the Abbot of Tine," he giggled. "Transcribed in the language of—"

"A wild guess," I interjected. "And a wrong one."

"Then the forbidden *Psalms of the Silent*. The book without an author."

“Without an author whoever lived in this world, if you will recall what I told you about it. But you're very wide of the mark.”

“Well, suppose you give me a hint,” he said with an impatience that surprised me.

“But wouldn't you prefer to speculate on its secrets?” I suggested. Some moments of precarious silence passed.

“I suppose I would,” he finally answered. Then I watched him gorge his eyes on the inscrutable script of the ancient volume.

In truth, the mysteries of this Sacred Writ were among the most genuine of their kind, for it had never been my intention to dupe my disciple, as he justly thought of himself, with false secrets. But the secrets of such a book are not perpetual. Once they are known, they become relegated to a lesser sphere, which is that of the knower. Having lost the prestige they once enjoyed, these former secrets now function as tools in the excavation of still deeper ones which, in turn, will suffer the same corrosive fate. And this is the fate of all the secrets of the universe. Eventually the seeker of a recondite knowledge may conclude—either through insight or sheer exhaustion—that this ruthless process is never-ending, that the mortification of one mystery after another has no terminus beyond that of the seeker's own extinction. And how many still remain susceptible to the search? How many pursue it to the end of their days with undying hope of some ultimate revelation? Better not to think in precise terms just how few the faithful are. More to the present point, it seems that Plomb belonged to their infinitesimal number. And it was my intention to reduce that number by one.

The plan was simple: to feed Plomb's hunger for mysterious sensations to the point of nausea... and beyond. The only thing to survive would be a gutful of shame and regret for a defunct passion.

As Plomb lay upon the sofa, ogling that stupid book, I moved toward a large cabinet whose several doors were composed of a tarnished metal grillwork framed by dark wood. I opened one of these doors and exposed a number of shelves cluttered with books and odd objects. Upon one shelf, resting there as its sole occupant, was a very white box. It was no larger, as I mentally envision it, than a modest jewelry case. There were no markings on the box, except the fingerprints, or rather thumbprints, smearing its smooth white surface at its opposing edges and halfway along its length. There were no handles or embellishments of any kind; not even, at first sight, the thinnest of seams to indicate the level at which the lower part of the box met the upper part, or perhaps give away the existence of a drawer. I smiled a little at the mock intrigue of the object, then gripped it from either side, gently, and placed my thumbs precisely over the fresh, greasy prints. I applied pressure with each thumb, and a shallow drawer popped open at the front of the box. As hoped, Plomb had been watching me as I went through these motions.

“What do you have there?” he asked.

“Patience, Plomb. You will see,” I answered while delicately removing two sparkling items from the drawer: one a small and silvery knife which very much resembled a razor-sharp letter opener, and the other a pair of old-fashioned wire-rimmed spectacles.

Plomb laid aside the now-boring book and sat up straight against the arm of the sofa. I sat down beside him and opened up the spectacles so that the stems were pointing toward his face. When he leaned forward, I slipped them on. “They're only plain glass,” he said with a definite tone of disappointment. “Or a very weak prescription.” His eyes rolled about as he attempted to scrutinize what rested upon his own face. Without saying a word, I held up the little knife in front of him until he finally took notice of it. “Ahhhh,” he said, smiling. “There's more to it.” “Of course there is,” I said, gently twirling the steely blade before his fascinated eyes. “If you would, I need you to hold out the palm of your hand. It doesn't matter which one. Good, just like that. Don't worry, you won't even feel this. There,” I said after making a tiny cut. “Now,” I instructed him, “keep watching that thin red trickle.

“Your eyes are now fused with those fantastic lenses, and your sight is one with its object. And what exactly is that object? Obviously it is everything that fascinates, everything that has power over your gaze and your dreams. You cannot even conceive the wish to look away. And even if there are no simple images to see, nonetheless there is a vision of some kind, an infinite and overwhelming scene expanding before you. And the vastness of this scene is such that even the dazzling diffusion of all the known universes cannot convey *these* prodigies. Everything is so brilliant, so great, and so alive. Landscapes without end are rolling with a life unknown to mortal eyes. Unimaginable diversity of form and motion, design and dimension, with each detail perfectly crystalline, from the mammoth shapes lurching in outline against endless horizons to the minutest cilia wrig-

gling in an obscure oceanic niche. And even this is only a mere fragment of all that there is to see and to know. There are labyrinthine astronomies mingling together and yielding instantaneous evolutions, constant transformations of both appearance and essence. You feel yourself to be a witness to the most cryptic phenomena that exist or ever could exist. And yet, somehow concealed in the shadows of what you can see is something that is not yet visible, something that is beating like a thunderous pulse and promises still greater visions. All else is merely its membrane enclosing the ultimate thing waiting to be born, preparing for the cataclysm which will be both the beginning and the end. To behold the prelude to this event is an experience of unbearable anticipation, so that ecstasy and dread merge into a new emotion, one corresponding perfectly to the exposure of the ultimate source of all manifestation. The next instant, it seems, will bring with it a revolution of the total substance of things. As the seconds keep passing, the experience grows more fascinating without fulfilling its portents, without extinguishing itself in revelation. And although the visions remain active inside you, deep in your blood—you now awake."

Pushing himself up from the sofa, Plomb staggered forward a few steps and wiped his bloodied palm on the front of his shirt, as if to wipe away the visions he had seen. He shook his head vigorously once or twice, but the spectacles remained secure.

"Is everything all right?" I asked him.

Plomb appeared to be dazzled in the worst way. Behind the spectacles his eyes gazed dumbly, and his mouth gaped with countless unspoken words. However, when I said, "Perhaps I should remove these for you," his hand rose toward

mine, as if to prevent me from doing so. But his effort was half-hearted. Folding their wire stems one across the other, I replaced them back in their box. Plomb now watched me, as if I were performing some ritual of great moment. He seemed to be still composing himself from his experience.

"Well?" I asked.

"Dreadful," he answered. "But..."

"But?"

"What I mean is—where did they come from?"

"Can't you imagine that for yourself?" I countered. And for a moment it seemed that in this case, too, he desired some simple answer, contrary to his most hardened habits. Then he smiled rather deviously and threw himself down upon the sofa. His eyes glazed over as he fabricated an anecdote to his fancy.

"I can see you," he said, "at an occultist auction in a disreputable quarter of a foreign city. The box is carried forward, the spectacles taken out. They were made several generations ago by a man who was at once a student of the Gnostics and a master of optometry. His ambition: to construct a pair of artificial eyes that would allow him to bypass the obstacle of physical appearances and glimpse a far-off realm of secret truth whose gateway is within the depths of our own blood."

"Remarkable," I replied. "Your speculation is so close to truth itself that the details are not worth mentioning for the mere sake of vulgar accuracy."

In fact, the spectacles belonged to a lot of antiquarian rubbish I once bought blindly, and the box was of unknown, or rather unremembered, origin—just something I had lying

around in my attic room. And the knife, a magician's prop for efficiently slicing up paper money and silk ties.

I carried the box containing both spectacles and knife over to Plomb, holding it just beyond his reach. I said, “Can you imagine the dangers involved, the possible nightmare of possessing such ‘artificial eyes?’” He nodded gravely in agreement. “And you can imagine the restraint the possessor of such a gruesome contrivance must practice.” His eyes were all comprehension, and he was sucking a little at his slightly lacerated palm. “Then nothing would please me more than to pass the ownership of this miraculous artifact on to you, my dear Plomb. I'm sure you will hold it in wonder as no one else could.”

And it was exactly this wonder that it was my malicious aim to undermine, or rather to expand until it ripped itself apart. For I could no longer endure the sight of it.

As Plomb once again stood at the door of my home, holding his precious gift with a child's awkward embrace, I could not resist asking him the question.

“By the way, Plomb, have you ever been hypnotized?”

“No,” he said. “Why do you ask?”

“Curiosity,” I replied. “You know how I am. Well, good night.”

Then I closed the door behind the most willing subject in the world, hoping it would be some time before he returned. “If ever,” I said aloud, and the words echoed in the hollows of my home.

2.

But it was not long afterward that Plomb and I had our next confrontation, though the circumstances were acci-

dental. Late one afternoon, as it happens, I was browsing through a shop that dealt in second-hand merchandise of the most pathetic sort. The place was positively littered with tossed-off oddments and pure trash: rusty scales that once would have given your weight for a penny, cockeyed bookcases, broken toys, old furniture, standing ashtrays late of some hotel lobby, and a hodge-podge of items that seemed entirely inscrutable in their origin and purpose. For me, however, such desolate bazaars offered more diversion and consolation than the most exotic marketplaces, which so often made good on their strange promises that mystery itself ceased to have meaning. But my second-hand seller made no promises and inspired no dreams, leaving all that to those more ambitious hucksters who trafficked in such stock in trade. And I had left that search behind me, as previously explained. What the mystical rarities of this earth were for Plomb, the most used-up and dismal commodities had become for me. Now I could ask no more of a given gray afternoon than to find myself in an establishment that had nothing to sell but the charm of disenchantment.

By coincidence, that particular afternoon in the second-hand shop brought me, if only in an indirect manner, together with Plomb. The visual transaction took place in a tilting mirror that stood near the shop's back wall, one of the many mirrors that seemed to constitute a specialty of the place. I had squatted down before this relic and wiped my bare hand across its dusty surface. And there, hidden beneath the dust, was the face of Plomb, who must have just entered the shop and was standing a room's length away. While he seemed to recognize immediately the reverse side of me, his expression betrayed the hope that I had not seen

him. There was shock as well as shame upon that face, and something else besides. And if Plomb had approached me, what could I have said to him? Perhaps I would have mentioned that he did not look very well or that it appeared he had been the victim of an accident. But how could he explain what had happened to him except to reveal the truth that we both knew and neither would speak? Fortunately, this scene was to remain in its hypothetical state, because a moment later he was out the door.

I cautiously approached the front window of the shop in time to see Plomb hurrying off into the dull, unreflecting day, his right hand held up to his face. “It was only my intention to cure him,” I mumbled to myself. I had not considered that he was incurable, nor that things would have developed in the way they did.

3.

After that day I wondered, eventually to the point of obsession, what kind of hell had claimed poor Plomb for its own. I knew only that I had provided him with a type of toy: the subliminal ability to feast his eyes on an imaginary universe in a droplet of his own blood. The possibility that he would desire to magnify this experience, or indeed that he would be capable of such a feat, had not seriously occurred to me. Obviously, however, this had become the case. I now had to ask myself how much farther Plomb's situation could be extended. The answer, though I could not guess it at the time, was presented to me in a dream.

And it seemed fitting that the dream had its setting in that old attic storeroom of my house, which Plomb once prized above all other rooms in the world. I was sitting in a

chair, a huge and enveloping chair which in reality does not exist but in the dream directly faces the sofa. No thoughts or feelings troubled me, and I had only the faintest sense that someone else was in the room. But I could not see who it was, because everything appeared so dim in outline, blurry and grayish. There seemed to be some movement in the region of the sofa, as if the enormous cushions themselves had become lethargically restless. Unable to fathom the source of this movement, I touched my hand to my temple in thought. This was how I discovered that I was wearing a pair of spectacles with circular lenses connected to wiry stems. I thought to myself: "If I remove these spectacles I will be able to see more clearly." But a voice told me not to remove them, and I recognized that voice. Then something moved, a man-shaped shadow upon the sofa. A climate of dull horror began to invade my surroundings. "Go away, Plomb. You have nothing to show me," I said. But the voice disagreed with me in sinister whispers that made no sense yet seemed filled with meaning. I would indeed be shown things, these whispers seemed to be saying. Already I was being shown things, astonishing things—mysteries and marvels beyond anything I had ever suspected. And suddenly all my feelings, as I gazed through the spectacles, were proof of that garbled pronouncement. They were feelings of a peculiar nature which, to my knowledge, one experiences only in dreams: sensations of infinite expansiveness and ineffable meaning that have no place elsewhere in our lives. But although these astronomical emotions suggested wonders of incredible magnitude and character, I saw nothing through those magic lenses except this: the obscure shape in the shadows before me as its outline grew clearer and clearer to my eyes. Gradu-

ally I came to view what appeared to be a mutilated carcass, something of a terrible rawness, a torn and flayed thing whose every laceration could be seen with microscopic precision. The only thing of color in my grayish surroundings, it twitched and quivered like a gory heart exposed beneath the body of the dream. And it made a sound like hellish giggling. Then it said, "I am back from my trip," as if mocking me.

It was this simple statement that inspired my efforts to tear the spectacles from my face, even though they now seemed to be part of my flesh. I gripped them with both hands and flung them against the wall, where they shattered. Somehow this served to exorcise my tormented companion, who faded back into the grayness. Then I looked at the wall and saw that it was running red where the spectacles had struck. And the broken lenses that lay upon the floor were bleeding.

To experience such a dream as this on a single occasion might very well be the stuff of a haunting, lifelong memory, something that perhaps might even be cherished for its unfathomable depths of feeling. But to suffer over and over this same nightmare, as I soon found was my fate, leads one to seek nothing so much as a way to kill the dream, to expose all its secrets and reduce it to fragments that can be forgotten.

In my search for this deliverance, I first looked to the sheltering shadows of my home, the sobering shadows which at other times had granted me a cold and stagnant peace. I tried to argue myself free of my nightly excursions, to discourse these visions away, lecturing the walls *contra* the prodigies of a mysterious world. "Since any form of ex-

istence," I muttered, "since any form of existence is by definition a conflict of forces, or it is nothing at all, what can it possibly matter if these skirmishes take place in a world of marvels or one of mud? The difference between the two is not worth mentioning, or none. Such distinctions are the work of only the crudest and most limited perspectives, the sense of mystery and wonder foremost among them. Even the most esoteric ecstasy, when it comes down to it, requires the prop of vulgar pain in order to stand up as an experience. Having acknowledged the truth, however provisional, and the reality, if subject to mutation, of all that is most strange in the universe—whether known, unknown, or merely suspected—one must conclude that such marvels change nothing in our existence. The gallery of human sensations that existed in prehistory is identical to the one that faces each life today, that will continue to face each new life as it enters this world... and then looks beyond it."

Thus I attempted to reason my way back to self-possession. But no measure of my former serenity was forthcoming. On the contrary, my days as well as my nights were now poisoned by an obsession with Plomb. Why had I given him those spectacles! More to the point, why did I allow him to retain them? It was time to take back my gift, to confiscate those little bits of glass and twisted metal that were now harrowing the wrong mind. And since I had succeeded too well in keeping him away from my door, I would have to be the one to approach his.

4.

But it was not Plomb who answered the rotting door of that house which stood at the street's end and beside a broad

expanse of empty field. It was not Plomb who asked if I was a newspaper journalist or a policeman before closing that gouged and filthy door in my face when I replied that I was neither of those. Pounding on the door, which seemed about to crumble under my fist, I summoned the sunken-eyed man a second time to ask if this in fact was Mr. Plomb's address. I had never visited him at his home, that hopeless little box in which he lived and slept and dreamed.

“Was he a relative?”

“No,” I answered.

“Then what? You're not here to collect a bill, because if that's the case…”

For the sake of simplicity I interjected that I was a friend of Mr. Plomb.

“Then how is it you don't know?”

For the sake of my curiosity I said that I had been away on a trip, as I often was, and had my own reasons for notifying Mr. Plomb of my return.

“Then you don't know anything,” he stated flatly.

“Exactly,” I replied.

“It was even in the newspaper. And they asked me about him.”

“Plomb,” I confirmed.

“That's right,” he said, as if he had suddenly become the custodian of a secret knowledge.

Then he waved me into the house and led me through its ugly, airless interior to a small storage room at the back. He reached along the wall inside the room, as if he wanted to avoid entering it, and switched on the light.

Immediately I understood why the hollow-faced man preferred not to go into that room, for Plomb had renovated

this space in a very strange way. Each wall, as well as the ceiling and floor, was a mosaic of mirrors, a shocking galaxy of redundant reflections. And each mirror was splattered across its surface, as if someone had swung brushfuls of paint from various points throughout the room, spreading dark stars across a silvery firmament. In his attempt to exhaust or exaggerate the visions to which he had apparently become enslaved, Plomb had done nothing less than multiplied these visions into infinity, creating oceans of his own blood and enabling himself to see with countless eyes. Entranced by such aspiration, I gazed at the mirrors in speechless wonder. Among them was that tilting mirror I remembered looking into not so long ago.

The landlord, who did not follow me into the room, said something about suicide and a body ripped raw. This news was of course unnecessary as I stood overwhelmed at Plomb's ingenuity. It was some time before I could look away from that gallery of glass and gore. Only afterward did I fully realize that I would never be rid of the horrible Plomb. He had broken through all the mirrors, projected himself into the eternity beyond them.

And even when I abandoned my home, with its hideous attic storeroom, Plomb still followed me in my dreams. He now travels with me to the ends of the earth, initiating me night after night into his unspeakable wonders. I can only hope that we will not meet in another place, one where the mysteries are always new and dreams never end. Oh, Plomb, will you not stay in that box where they have put your self-riven body?

The Spectacles in the Drawer (1991 Grimscribe Version)

First published in *Etchings And Odysseys* #10, 1987

1.

Last year at this time, perhaps on this very day, Plomb visited me at my home. He always seemed to know when I had returned from my habitual travelling and always appeared uninvited on my doorstep. Although this former residence of mine was pathetically run-down, Plomb seemed to regard it as a kind of castle or fortress, always gazing up at its high ceilings as if he were witnessing its wonders for the first time. That day—a dim one, I think—he did not fail to do the same. Then we settled into one of the spacious though sparsely furnished rooms of my house.

"And how were your travels?" he asked, as if only in the spirit of polite conversation. I could see by his smile—an emulation of my own, no doubt—that he was glad to be back in my house and in my company. I smiled too and stood up. Plomb, of course, stood up along with me, almost simultaneously with my own movements.

"Shall we go then?" I said. *What a pest*, I thought.

Our footsteps tapped a moderate time on the hard wooden floor leading to the stairway. We ascended to the second floor, which I left almost entirely empty, and then up a narrower stairway to the third floor. Although I had led him along this route several times before, I could see from

his wandering eyes that, for him, every tendrilled swirl of wallpaper, every cobweb fluttering in the corners above, every stale draft of the house composed a suspenseful prelude to our destination. At the end of the third-floor hall there was a small wooden stairway, no more than a ladder, that led to an old storeroom where I kept certain things which I collected.

It was not by any means a spacious room, and its enclosed atmosphere was thickened, as Plomb would have emphasized, by its claustrophobic arrangement of tall cabinets, ceiling-high shelves, and various trunks and crates. This is simply how things worked out over a period of time. In any case, Plomb seemed to favor this state of affairs. “Ah, the room of secret mystery,” he said. “Where all your treasures are kept, all the raw wonders cached away.”

These treasures and wonders, as Plomb called them, were, I suppose, remarkable from a certain point of view. Plomb loved to go through all the old objects and articles, gathering together a lapful of curios and settling down on the dusty sofa at the center of this room. But it was the new items, whenever I returned from one of my protracted tours, that always took precedence in Plomb's hierarchy of wonders. Thus, I immediately brought out the double-handled dagger with the single blade of polished stone. At first sight of the ceremonial object, Plomb held out the flat palms of his hands, and I placed this exotic device upon its rightful altar. “Who could have made such a thing?” he asked, though rhetorically. He expected no answer to his questions and possibly did not really desire any. And of course I offered no more elaborate an explanation than a simple smile. But how quickly, I noticed, the magic of that first fragment of

“speechless wonder,” as he would say, lost its initial surge of fascination. How fast that glistening fog, which surrounded only him, dispersed to unveil a tedious clarity. I had to move faster.

“Here,” I said, my arm searching the shadows of an open wardrobe. “This should be worn when you handle that sacrificial artifact.” And I threw the robe about his shoulders, engulfing his smallish frame with a cyclone of strange patterns and colors. He admired himself in the mirror attached inside the door of the wardrobe. “Look at the robe in the mirror,” he practically shouted. “The designs are all turned around. How much stranger, how much better.” While he stood there glaring at himself, I relieved him of the dagger before he had a chance to do something careless. This left his hands free to raise themselves up to the dust-caked ceiling of the room, and to the dark gods of his imagination. Gripping each handle of the dagger, I suddenly elevated it above his head, where I held it poised. In a few moments he started to giggle, then fell into spasms of sardonic hilarity. He stumbled over to the old sofa and collapsed upon its soft cushions. I followed, but when I reached his prostrate form it was not the pale-blue blade that I brought down upon his chest—it was simply a book, one of many I had put before him.

His peaked legs created a lectern on which he rested the huge volume, propping it securely as he began turning the stiff crackling pages. The sound seemed to absorb him as much as the sight of a language he could not even name let alone comprehend.

“The lost grimoire of the Abbot of Tine,” he giggled. “Transcribed in the language of—”

“A wild guess,” I interjected. “And a wrong one.”

"Then the forbidden *Psalms of the Silent*. The book without an author."

"Without a *living* author, if you will recall what I told you about it. But you're very wide of the mark."

"Well, suppose you give me a hint," he said with an impatience that surprised me. "Suppose—"

"But wouldn't you prefer to guess at its wonders, Plomb?" I suggested encouragingly. Some moments of precarious silence passed.

"I suppose I would," he finally answered, and to my relief. Then I watched him gorge his eyes on the inscrutable script of the ancient volume.

In truth, the mysteries of this Sacred Writ were among the most genuine of their kind, for it had never been my intention to dupe my disciple—as he justly thought of himself—with false secrets. But the secrets of such a book are not absolute: once they are known, they become relegated to a lesser sphere, which is that of the knower. Having lost the prestige they once enjoyed, these former secrets now function as tools in the excavation of still deeper ones which, in turn, will suffer the same corrosive fate. And this is the fate of all true secrets. Eventually the seeker may conclude either through insight or sheer exhaustion that this ruthless process is neverending, that the mortification of one mystery after another has no terminus beyond that of the seeker's own extinction. And how many still remain susceptible to the search? How many pursue it to the end of their days with undying hope of some ultimate revelation? Better not to think in precise terms just how few the faithful are. More to the present point, it seems that Plomb was one of their infin-

itesimal number. And it was my intention to reduce that number by one.

The plan was simple: to feed Plomb's hunger for mysterious sensations to the point of nausea... and beyond. The only thing to survive would be a gutful of shame and regret for a defunct passion.

As Plomb lay upon the sofa, ogling that stupid book, I moved toward a large cabinet whose several doors were composed of a tarnished metal grillwork framed by darkest wood. I opened one of these doors and exposed a number of shelves cluttered with books and odd objects. Upon one shelf, resting there as sole occupant, was a very white box. It was no larger, as I mentally envision it, than a modest jewelry case. There were no markings on the box, except the fingerprints, or rather thumbprints, smearing its smooth white surface at its opposing edges and halfway along its length. There were no handles or embellishments of any kind; not even, at first sight, the thinnest of seams to indicate the level at which the lower part of the box met the upper part, or perhaps give away the existence of a drawer. I smiled a little at the mock intrigue of the object, then gripped it from either side, gently, and placed my thumbs precisely over the fresh thumbprints. I applied pressure with each thumb, and a shallow drawer popped open at the front of the box. As hoped, Plomb had been watching me as I went through these meaningless motions.

“What do you have there?” he asked:

“Patience, Plomb. You will see,” I answered while delicately removing two sparkling items from the drawer: one a small and silvery knife which very much resembled a razor-

sharp letter opener, and the other a pair of old fashioned wire-rimmed spectacles.

Plomb laid aside the now boring book and sat up straight against the arm of the sofa. I sat down beside him and opened up the spectacles so that the stems were pointing toward his face. When he leaned forward, I slipped them on. “They're only plain glass,” he said with a definite tone of disappointment. “Or a very weak prescription.” His eyes rolled about as he attempted to scrutinize what rested upon his own face. Without saying a word, I held up the little knife in front of him until he finally took notice of it. “Ahhhh,” he said, smiling. “There's more to it.”

“Of course there is,” I said, gently twirling the steely blade before his fascinated eyes. “Now hold out your palm, just like that. Good, good. You won't even feel this, completely harmless. Now,” I instructed him, “keep watching that tiny red trickle.

“Your eyes are now fused with those fantastic lenses, and your sight is one with its object. And what exactly is that object? Obviously it is everything that fascinates, everything that has power over your gaze and your dreams. You cannot even conceive the wish to look away. And even if there are no simple images to see, nonetheless there is a vision of some kind, an infinite and overwhelming scene expanding before you. And the vastness of this scene is such that even the dazzling diffusion of all the known universes cannot convey its wonder. Everything is so brilliant, so great, and so alive: landscapes without end that are rolling with life, landscapes that are themselves alive. Unimaginable diversity of form and motion, design and dimension. And each detail is perfectly crystalline, from the mammoth shapes lurching in

outline against endless horizons to the minutest cilia wriggling in an obscure oceanic niche. Even this is only a mere fragment of all that there is to see and to know. There are labyrinthine astronomies, discrete systems of living mass which yet are woven together by a complex of intersections, at points mingling in a way that mutually affects those systems involved, yielding instantaneous evolutions, constant transformations of both appearance and essence. You are witness to all that exists or ever could exist. And yet, somehow concealed in the shadows of all that you can see is something that is not yet visible, something that is beating like a thunderous pulse and promises still greater visions: all else is merely its membrane enclosing the ultimate thing waiting to be born, preparing for the cataclysm which will be both the beginning and the end. To behold the prelude to this event must be an experience of unbearable anticipation, so that hope and dread merge into a new emotion, one corresponding perfectly to the absolute and the wholly unknown. The next instant, it seems, will bring with it a revolution of all matter and energy. But the seconds keep passing, the experience grows more fascinating without fulfilling its portents, without extinguishing itself in revelation. And although the visions remain active inside you, deep in your blood, you now awake."

Pushing himself up from the sofa, Plomb staggered forward a few steps and wiped his bloodied palm on the front of his shirt, as if to wipe away the visions. He shook his head vigorously once or twice, but the spectacles remained secure.

"Is everything all right?" I asked him.

Plomb appeared to be dazzled in the worst way. Behind the spectacles his eyes gazed dumbly, and his mouth gaped with countless unspoken words. However, when I said, “Perhaps I should remove these for you,” his hand rose toward mine, as if to prevent me from doing so. But his effort was half-hearted. Folding their wire stems one across the other, I replaced them back in their box. Plomb now watched me, as if I were performing some ritual of great fascination. He seemed to be still composing himself from the experience.

“Well?” I asked.

“Dreadful,” he answered. “But…”

“But?”

“But I…”

“You?”

“What I mean is where did they come from?”

“Can't you imagine that for yourself?” I countered. And for a moment it seemed that in this case, too, he desired some simple answer, contrary to his most hardened habits. Then he smiled rather deviously and threw himself down upon the sofa. His eyes glazed over as he fabricated an anecdote to his fancy.

“I can see you,” he said, “at an occultist auction in a disreputable quarter of a foreign city. The box is carried forward, the spectacles taken out. They were made several generations ago by a man who was at once a student of the Gnostics and a master of optometry. His ambition: to construct a pair of artificial eyes that would allow him to bypass the obstacle of physical appearances and glimpse a far-off realm of secret truth whose gateway is within the depths of our own blood.”

“Remarkable,” I replied. “Your speculation is so close to truth itself that the details are not worth mentioning for the mere sake of vulgar correctness.”

In fact, the spectacles belonged to a lot of antiquarian rubbish I once bought blindly, and the box was of unknown, or rather unremembered, origin—just something I had lying around in my attic room. And the knife, a magician's prop for efficiently slicing up paper money and silk ties.

I carried the box containing both spectacles and knife over to Plomb, holding it slightly beyond his reach. I said, “Can you imagine the dangers involved, the possible nightmare of possessing such ‘artificial eyes’?” He nodded gravely in agreement. “And you can imagine the restraint the possessor of such a gruesome artifact must practice.” His eyes were all comprehension, and he was sucking a little at his slightly lacerated palm. “Then nothing would please me more than to pass the ownership of this obscure miracle on to you, my dear Plomb. I'm sure you will hold it in wonder as no one else could.”

And it was exactly this wonder that it was my malicious aim to undermine, or rather to expand until it ripped itself apart. For I could no longer endure the sight of it.

As Plomb once again stood at the door of my home, holding his precious gift with a child's awkward embrace, I could not resist asking him the question. Opening the door for him, I said, “By the way, Plomb, have you ever been hypnotized?”

“I...” he answered.

“You,” I prompted.

“No,” he said. “Why do you ask?”

“Curiosity,” I replied. “You know how I am. Well, goodnight, Plomb.”

And I closed the door behind the most willing subject in the world, hoping it would be some time before he returned. “If ever,” I said aloud, and the words echoed in the hollows of my home.

2.

But it was not long afterward that Plomb and I had our next confrontation, though the circumstances were odd and accidental. Late one afternoon, as it happens, I was browsing through a shop that dealt in second-hand merchandise of the most pathetic sort. The place was littered with rusty scales that once would have given your weight for a penny, cock-eyed bookcases, dead toys, furniture without style or substance, grotesque standing ashtrays late of some hotel lobby, and a hodge-podge of old-fashioned fixtures. For me, however, such decrepit bazaars offered more diversion and consolation than the most exotic marketplaces, which so often made good on their strange promises that mystery itself ceased to have meaning. But my second-hand seller made no promises and inspired no dreams, leaving all that to those more ambitious hucksters who trafficked in such perishable stock in trade. At the time I could ask no more of a given gray afternoon than to find myself in one of these enchantingly desolate establishments.

That particular afternoon in the second-hand shop brought me a brief glimpse of Plomb in a second-hand manner. The visual transaction took place in a mirror that leaned against a wall, one of the many mirrors that seemed to constitute a specialty of the shop. I had squatted down be-

fore this rectangular relic, whose frame reminded me of the decorated borders of old books, and wiped my bare hand across its dusty surface. And there, hidden beneath the dust, was the face of Plomb, who must have just entered the shop and was standing a room's length away. While he seemed to recognize immediately the reverse side of me, his expression betrayed the hope that I had not seen him. There was shock as well as shame upon that face, and something else besides. And if Plomb had approached me, what could I have said to him? Perhaps I would have mentioned that he did not look very well or that it appeared he had been the victim of an accident. But how could he explain what had happened to him except to reveal the truth that we both knew and neither would speak? Fortunately, this scene was to remain in its hypothetical state, because a moment later he was out the door.

I cautiously approached the front window of the shop in time to see Plomb hurrying off into the dull, unreflecting day, his right hand held up to his face. “It was only my intention to cure him,” I mumbled to myself. I had not considered that he was incurable, nor that things would have developed in the way they did.

3.

And after that day I wondered, eventually to the point of obsession, what kind of hell had claimed poor Plomb for its own. I knew only that I had provided him with a type of toy: the subliminal ability to feast his eyes on an imaginary universe in a rivulet of his own blood. The possibility that he would desire to magnify this experience, or indeed that he would be capable of such a feat, had not seriously occurred to me. Obviously, however, this had become the case. I now

had to ask myself how much farther could Plomb's situation be extended. The answer, though I could not guess it at the time, was presented to me in a dream.

And it seemed fitting that the dream had its setting in that old attic storeroom of my house, which Plomb once prized above all other rooms in the world. I was sitting in a chair, a huge and enveloping chair which in reality does not exist but in the dream directly faces the sofa.

No thoughts or feelings troubled me, and I had only the faintest sense that someone else was in the room. But I could not see who it was, because everything appeared so dim in outline, blurry and grayish. There seemed to be some movement in the region of the sofa, as if the enormous cushions themselves had become lethargically restless. Unable to fathom the source of this movement, I touched my hand to my temple in thought. This was how I discovered that I was wearing a pair of spectacles with circular lenses connected to wiry stems. I thought to myself:

"If I remove these spectacles I will be able to see more clearly." But a voice told me not to remove them, and I recognized that voice. "Plomb," I said. And then something moved, like a man-shaped shadow, upon the sofa. A climate of dull horror began to invade my surroundings.

"Even if your trip is over," I said deliriously, you have nothing to show for it." But the voice disagreed with me in sinister whispers that made no sense but seemed filled with meaning. I would indeed be shown things, these whispers might have said. Already I was being shown things, astonishing things mysteries and marvels beyond anything I had ever suspected. And suddenly all my feelings, as I gazed through the spectacles, were proof of that garbled pro-

nouncement. They were feelings of a peculiar nature which, to my knowledge, one experiences only in dreams: sensations of infinite expansiveness and ineffable meaning that have no place elsewhere in our lives. But although these monstrous, astronomical emotions suggested wonders of incredible magnitude and character, I saw nothing through those magic lenses except this: the obscure shape in the shadows before me as its outline grew clearer and clearer to my eyes. Gradually I came to view what appeared to be a mutilated carcass, something of a terrible rawness, a torn and flayed thing whose every laceration could be traced in crystalline sharpness. The only thing of color in my grayish surroundings, it twitched and quivered like a gory heart exposed beneath the body of the dream. And it made a sound like hellish giggling. Then it said: "I am back from my trip," in a horrible, piercing voice.

It was this simple statement that inspired my efforts to tear the spectacles from my face, even though they now seemed to be part of my flesh. I gripped them with both hands and flung them against the wall, where they shattered. Somehow this served to exorcise my tormented companion, who faded back into the grayness. Then I looked at the wall and saw that it was running red where the spectacles had struck. And the broken lenses that lay upon the floor were bleeding.

To experience such a dream as this on a single occasion might very well be the stuff of a haunting, lifelong memory, something that perhaps might even be cherished for its unfathomable depths of feeling. But to suffer over and over this same nightmare, as I soon found was my fate, leads one to

seek nothing so much as a cure to kill the dream, to reveal all its secrets and thus bring about a selective amnesia.

At first I looked to the sheltering shadows of my home for deliverance and forgetfulness, the sobering shadows which at other times had granted me a cold and stagnant peace. I tried to argue myself free of my nightly excursions, to discourse these visions away, lecturing the walls contra the prodigies of a mysterious world. "Since any form of existence," I muttered, "since any form of existence is by definition a conflict of forces, or it is nothing at all, what can it possibly matter if these skirmishes take place in a world of marvels or one of mud? The difference between the two is not worth mentioning, or none. Such distinctions are the work of only the crudest and most limited perspectives, the sense of mystery and wonder foremost among them. Even the most esoteric ecstasy, when it comes down to it, requires the prop of vulgar pain in order to stand up as an experience. Having acknowledged the truth, however provisional, and the reality, if subject to mutation, of all the strange things in the universe whether known, unknown, or merely suspected—one is left with no recourse than to conclude that none of them makes any difference, that such marvels change nothing: our experience remains the same. The gallery of human sensations that existed in prehistory is identical to the one that faces each life today, that will continue to face each new life as it enters this world… and then looks beyond it."

And thus I attempted to reason my way back to self-possession. But no measure of my former serenity was forthcoming. On the contrary, my days as well as my nights were now poisoned by an obsession with Plomb. Why had I given

him those spectacles! More to the point, why did I allow him to retain them? It was time to take back my gift, to confiscate those little bits of glass and twisted metal that were now harrowing the wrong mind. And since I had succeeded too well in keeping him away from my door, I would have to be the one to approach his.

4.

But it was not Plomb who answered the rotting door of that house which stood at the street's end and beside a broad expanse of empty field. It was not Plomb who asked if I was a newspaper journalist or a policeman before closing that gouged and filthy door in my face when I replied that I was neither of those persons. Pounding on that wobbling door, which seemed about to crumble under my fist, I summoned the sunken-eyed man a second time to ask if this in fact was Mr. Plomb's address. I had never visited him at his home, that hopeless little box in which he lived and slept and dreamed.

“Was he a relative?”

“No,” I answered.

“A friend. You're not here to collect a bill, because if that's the case…”

For the sake of simplicity I interjected that, yes, I was a friend of Mr. Plomb.

“Then how is it you don't know?”

For the sake of my curiosity I said that I had been away on a trip, as I often was, and had my own reasons for notifying Mr. Plomb of my return.

“Then you don't know anything,” he stated flatly.

“Exactly,” I replied.

“It was even in the newspaper. And they asked me about him.”

“Plomb,” I confirmed.

“That's right,” he said, as if he had suddenly become the custodian of a secret knowledge.

Then he waved me into the house and led me through its ugly, airless interior to a small storage room at the back. He reached along the wall inside the room, as if he wanted to avoid entering it, and switched on the light. Immediately I understood why the hollow-faced man preferred not to go into that room, for Plomb had renovated that tiny space in a very strange way. Each wall, as well as the ceiling and floor, was a mosaic of mirrors, a shocking galaxy of redundant reflections. And each mirror was splattered with sinister droplets, as if someone had swung several brushfuls of paint from various points throughout the room, spreading dark stars across a silvery firmament. In his attempt to exhaust or exaggerate the visions to which he had apparently become enslaved, Plomb had done nothing less than multiplied these visions into infinity, creating oceans of his own blood and enabling himself to see with countless eyes. Entranced by such aspiration, I gazed at the mirrors in speechless wonder. Among them was one I remembered looking into some days —or was it weeks?—before.

The landlord, who did not follow me into the room, said something about suicide and a body ripped raw. This news was of course unnecessary, even boring. But I was overwhelmed at Plomb's ingenuity: it was some time before I could look away from that gallery of glass and gore. Only afterward did I fully realize that I would never be rid of the

horrible Plomb. He had broken through all the mirrors, projected himself into the eternity beyond them.

And even when I abandoned my home, with its hideous attic storeroom, Plomb still followed me in my dreams. He now travels with me to the ends of the earth, initiating me night after night into his unspeakable wonders. I can only hope that we will not meet in another place, one where the mysteries are always new and dreams never end. Oh, Plomb, will you not stay in that box where they have put your riven body?

Vastarien (2010 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu* #48, 1987

Within the blackness of his sleep a few lights began to glow like candles in a cloistered cell. Their illumination was unsteady and dim, issuing from no definite source. Nonetheless, he now discovered many shapes beneath the shadows: tall buildings whose rooftops nodded groundward, wide buildings whose façades followed the curve of a street, dark buildings whose windows and doorways tilted like badly hung paintings. And even if he found himself unable to fix his own location in this scene, he knew where his dreams had delivered him once more.

Even as the warped structures multiplied in his vision, crowding the lost distance, he possessed a sense of intimacy with each of them, a special knowledge of the spaces inside them and of the streets which coiled themselves around their mass. Once again he knew the depths of their foundations, where an obscure life seemed to establish itself, a sequestered civilization of echoes flourishing among groaning walls. Yet upon his probing more extensively into such interiors, certain difficulties presented themselves: stairways that wandered off-course into useless places; caged elevators that urged unwanted stops on their passengers; thin ladders

ascending into a maze of shafts and conduits, the dark valves and arteries of a petrified and monstrous organism.

And he knew that every corner of this corroded world was prolific with choices, even if they had to be made blindly in a place where clear consequences and a hierarchy of possibilities were lacking. For there might be a room whose decor exuded a desolate serenity which at first attracts the visitor, who then discovers certain figures enveloped in plush furniture, figures that do not move or speak but only stare; and, concluding that these weary manikins have exercised a bizarre indulgence in repose, the visitor must ponder the alternatives: to linger or to leave?

Eluding the claustral enchantments of such rooms, his gaze now roamed the streets of this dream and scanned the altitudes beyond high sloping roofs. The stars seemed to be no more than silvery cinders which showered up from the mouths of great chimneys and clung to something dark and dense heaving above, a material presence that slouched and slumped, nearly lowering over the horizon. It appeared to him that certain high towers nearly breached this sagging blackness, stretching themselves nightward to attain the farthest possible remove from the world below. And toward the peak of one of the highest towers he spied vague silhouettes that moved hectically in a bright window, twisting and leaning upon the glass like shadow-puppets in the fever of some mad dispute.

Through the mazy streets his vision slowly glided, as if carried along by a sluggish draft. Darkened windows reflected the beams of grotesquely configured streetlamps, and lighted windows betrayed strange scenes which were left behind long before their full mystery could overwhelm the

dreaming traveler. Wandering into thoroughfares more remote, he soared past cluttered gardens and crooked gates, drifted alongside a fence of rotted palings that seemed to teeter into an abyss, and floated over bridges that arched above the purling waters of black canals.

Near a certain streetcorner, a place of supernatural clarity and stillness, he saw two figures standing beneath the crystalline glaze of a lantern ensconced high upon a wall of carved stone. Their shadows were perfect columns of blackness upon the livid pavement; their faces were a pair of faded masks concealing profound schemes. And they appeared to have lives of their own, with no awareness of their dreaming observer, who wished only to live with these specters and know *their* dreams, to remain in this place that owed nothing to corporeal existence.

Never, it seemed, could he be forced to abandon this domain of wayward wonders. *Never.*

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Victor Keirion awoke with a brief convulsion of his limbs, as if he had been chaotically scrambling to break his fall from an imaginary height. For a moment he held his eyes closed, hoping to preserve the dissipating euphoria of the dream. Finally he blinked once or twice. Moonlight through a curtainless window allowed him the image of his outstretched arms and his somewhat twisted hands. Releasing his awkward hold on the edge of the sheeted mattress, he rolled onto his back. Then he groped around until his fingers found the cord dangling from the light above the bed. A small, barely furnished room appeared.

He pushed himself up and reached toward the painted metal nightstand. Through the spaces between his fingers he saw the pale gray binding of a book and some of the dark letters tooled upon its cover: V, S, R, N. Suddenly he withdrew his hand without touching the book, for the magical intoxication of the dream had died, and he feared that he would not be able to revive it.

Freeing himself from coarse bedcovers, he planted his feet on the cold floor, elbows resting on his legs and hands loosely folded. His hair and eyes were pale and his complexion rather grayish, suggesting the color of certain clouds or that of long confinement. The only window in the room was just a few steps away, but he kept himself from approaching it, from even glancing in its direction. He knew exactly what he would see at that time of night: tall buildings, wide buildings, dark buildings, a scattering of stars and lights, and some lethargic movement in the streets below.

In so many ways the city outside the window was a semblance of that other place, which now seemed impossibly far off and inaccessible. But the likeness was evident only to his inner vision, only in the recollected images he formed when his eyes were closed or out of focus. It would be difficult to conceive of a creature for whom *this* world—its bare form seen with open eyes—represented a coveted paradise.

Now standing before the window, his hands deep in the pockets of a papery bathrobe, he saw that something was missing from the view, some crucial property that was denied to the stars above and the streets below, some unearthly essence needed to save them. Though unspoken, the word *unearthly* reverberated in the room. In that place and at that hour, the paradoxical absence, the missing quality,

became clear to him: it was the element of unreality, or perhaps of a reality so saturated with its own presence that it had made a leap into the unreal.

Such was the secret sanctuary of Victor Keirion, a votary of that wretched sect of souls who believe that the only value of this world lies in its power—at certain times—to suggest another. Nevertheless, the place he now surveyed through the high window could never be anything but the most gauzy phantom of that other place, nothing save a shadowy mimic of the anatomy of that great dream. And though there were indeed times when one might be deceived, isolated moments when a gift for disguise triumphed, the impersonation could never be perfect or lasting. No true challenge to the rich unreality of Vastarien, where every formation suggested a thousand others, every sound disseminated everlasting echoes, every word founded a world. No horror, no joy was the equal of the abysmally vibrant sensations known in this place that was elsewhere, this spellbinding retreat where all experiences were interwoven to compose fantastic textures of feeling, a fine and dark tracery of limitless patterns. For everything in the unreal points to the infinite, and everything in Vastarien was unreal, unbounded by the strictures of existing. Even its most humble aspects proclaimed this truth: was there anything or anywhere in tedious actuality that could conjure the abundant and strange imaginings in the dream?

Then, as he focused his eyes upon a distant part of the city, he recalled the place that had opened the door to his long-sought abode of exquisite disfigurations.

Nothing of what lay within was intimated by its modest entranceway: a rectangle of smudged glass within another

rectangle of scuffed wood, a battered thing lodged within a brick wall at the bottom of a stairway leading down from a crumbling street. And it pushed easily inward, merely a delicate formality between the underground shop and the outside world. Inside was an open room of vaguely circular shape that seemed more like the lobby of an old hotel than a bookstore. The circumference of the room was composed of crowded shelves whose separate sections were joined to one another to create a polygon of eleven sides, with a long desk standing where a twelfth would have been. Beyond the desk stood more bookshelves, their considerable length leading into shadows. At the furthest point from this part of the shop, Victor Keirion began his circuit of the shelves, which appeared so promising in their array of ruddy bindings, like remnants of a luxuriant autumn.

Very soon, however, he felt betrayed as the mystique of the Librairie de Grimoires was stripped away to reveal, in his eyes, a sideshow of charlatanry. For this disillusionment he had only himself to blame. It was his own fault that he continually subjected himself to the discrepancy between what he hoped to find and what he actually found in such establishments. In truth, there was little basis for his belief that there existed some arcana of a different kind altogether from that tendered by the books before him, all of which were sodden with an obscene reality. The other worlds portrayed in these books served only as annexes of this one; they were impostors of the authentic unreality which was the only redemption for Victor Keirion. And it was this *terminal* point that he sought, not those guidebooks of the "way" to useless destinations, heavens or hells that were mere pretexts for circumnavigating the real and reveling in

it. For he dreamed of shadowed volumes that preached no earthly catechisms but delineated only a tenebrous liturgy of the spectral and rites of salvation by way of meticulous derangement. His absolute: to dwell among the ruins of reality.

And it seemed to surpass all probability that there existed no bibliographic representation of this dream, no elaboration of this vision in a delirious bible that would be the blight of all others—a scripture that would begin with portents of apocalypse and end with the wreck of all creation.

He had, in fact, come upon passages in certain books that approached this ideal, hinting to the reader—almost admonishing him—that the pages before his eyes were about to offer a view from the abyss and cast a wavering light on desolate hallucinations. *To become the wind in the dead of winter and howl the undoing of all that would abide in warmth and light*. So might begin an enticing verse in a volume of esoterica. But soon the bemazed visionary would falter, retracting the promised flight to emaciated landscapes of unbeing, perhaps offering an apologetics for this lapse into the unreal. The work would then take up the timeworn theme, disclosing its true purpose in belaboring the most futile and profane of all ambitions: the dream of attaining some untainted good, with mystic knowledge as its drudge. The vision of a disastrous enlightenment was conjured up in passing and then cast aside. What remained was invariably a metaphysics as systematically trivial and debased as the world it purported to transcend, a manual outlining the path to some hypothetical state of pure glory. What remained *lost* was the revelation that nothing ever known has ended in glory; that all which ends does so in exhaustion, confusion, and debris.

All the same, a book that contained even a deceitful gesture toward Victor Keirion's truly eccentric absolute might indeed serve his purpose. Directing the attention of a bookseller to selected contents of such books, he would say: “I have an interest in a certain subject area, perhaps you will see… that is, I wonder, do you know of other, what should I say, *sources* that you would be able to recommend to assist me in my research, by which I mean…”

Sometimes he was referred to another bookseller or to the owner of a private collection. Occasionally it happened that he had been ludicrously misunderstood when he found himself on the fringe of a society devoted to some strictly demonic enterprise.

The very bookshop in which Victor Keirion was now browsing represented only the most recent digression in a search without progress. But he had learned to be cautious and would try to waste as little time as possible in determining whether or not there was anything for him here. Thus, he intently flipped through the pages of one book after another.

Absorbed as he was in perusing so much verbiage, he was startled when someone with a voice like that of a child spoke to him.

“Have you seen our friend?” asked a nearby voice, startling him somewhat. Victor Keirion turned to face the stranger. The man was rather small and wore a black overcoat; his hair was also black and fell loosely across his forehead. Besides his general appearance, there was also something about his presence that made one think of a crow, a scavenging creature in wait. “Has he come out of his sanc-

tum?" the man asked, gesturing toward the empty desk and the dark area behind it.

"I'm sorry, I haven't seen anyone," Keirion replied. "I only now noticed you."

"I can't help being quiet. Look at these little feet," the man said, indicating his highly polished pair of black shoes. Without thinking, Keirion looked down; then, feeling duped, he looked up again at the smiling stranger.

"You look very bored," said the human crow.

"I'm sorry?"

"Never mind. I can see that I'm bothering you." Then the man walked away, his coat flapping slightly, and began scanning some distant bookshelves. "I've never seen you in here before," he said from across the room.

"I've never been in here before," Keirion answered.

"Have you ever read this?" the stranger asked, pulling down a book and holding up its wordless black cover.

"Never," Keirion replied without so much as glancing at the book. Somehow this seemed the best action to take with this character, who appeared to be foreign in some indefinable way.

"Well, you must be looking for something special," continued the other man, replacing the black book on its shelf. "And I know what that's like, when you're looking for something very special. Have you ever heard of a book, an extremely special book, that is not... yes, that is not *about* something, but actually is that something?"

For the first time the obnoxious stranger had managed to intrigue Keirion rather than annoy him. "That sounds..." he started to say, but then the other man exclaimed:

"There he is, there he is. Excuse me."

It seemed that the proprietor—that mutual friend—had finally made his appearance and was now standing behind the desk, looking toward his two customers. “My friend,” said the crow-man as he stepped with outstretched hand over to the smoothly bald and softly fat gentleman. The two of them shook hands. For a few moments they chatted quietly, much too quietly for Victor Keirion to hear what they were saying. Then the crow-man was invited behind the desk, and—led by the corpulent bookseller—made his way into the darkness at the back of the shop. In a distant corner of that darkness the brilliant rectangle of a doorway suddenly flashed into outline, admitting through its frame a large, two-headed shadow.

Left alone among the worthless volumes of that shop, Victor Keirion felt the sad frustration of the uninvited, the abandoned. More than ever he had become infected with hopes and curiosities of an indeterminable kind. And he soon found it impossible to remain outside that radiant little room the other two had entered, and at whose door he presently stood in silence.

The room was a cramped cubicle within which stood another cubicle formed by free-standing bookcases, creating four very narrow aisleways in the space between them. From the doorway he could not see how the inner cubicle might be entered, but he heard the voices of the others whispering within. Stepping quietly, he began making his way along the perimeter of the room, his eyes surveying a wealth of odd-looking volumes.

Immediately he sensed that something of a special nature awaited his discovery, and the evidence for this intuition began to build. Each book that he examined served as a clue

in this delirious investigation, a cryptic sign which engaged his powers of interpretation and imparted the faith to proceed. Many of the works were written in foreign languages he did not read; some appeared to be composed in ciphers based on familiar characters and others seemed to be transcribed in a wholly artificial cryptography. But in every one of these books he found an oblique guidance, some feature of more or less indirect significance: a strangeness in the typeface, pages and bindings of uncommon texture, abstract diagrams suggesting no orthodox ritual or occult system. Even greater anticipation was inspired by certain illustrated plates, mysterious drawings and engravings that depicted scenes and situations unlike anything he could name. And such works as *Cynothoglys* or *The Noctuary of Tine* conveyed schemes so bizarre, so remote from known texts and treatises of the esoteric tradition, that he felt assured of the sense of his quest.

The whispering grew louder, though no more distinct, as he edged around a corner of that inner cubicle and anxiously noted the opening at its far end. At the same time he was distracted, for no apparent reason, by a small grayish volume leaning within a gap created by oversized tomes on either side. The little book had been set upon the highest shelf, making it necessary for him to stretch himself, as if on an upright torture rack, to reach it. Trying not to give away his presence by the sounds of his pain, he finally secured the ashen-colored object—as pale as his own coloring—between the tips of his first two fingers. Mutely he strained to slide it quietly from its place. This act accomplished, he slowly shrunk down to his original stature and looked into the book's brittle pages.

It seemed to be a chronicle of strange dreams. Yet somehow the passages he examined were less a recollection of unruled visions than a tangible incarnation of them, not mere rhetoric but the thing itself, just as the crow-man had described. The use of language in the book was arrantly unnatural and the book's author unknown. Indeed, the text conveyed the impression of speaking for itself and speaking only to itself, its words being like shadows that were cast by no forms outside the book. But though this volume appeared to be composed in a vernacular of mysteries, its words did inspire a sure understanding and created in their reader a visceral apprehension of the phenomenon to which the characters cut into the front of the book gave name. Passing his right forefinger across these gnarled letters, which appeared to be deeply engraved into the volume's stiffly bound surface, Victor Keirion could not feel their physicality. It was as if he intuited the word they spelled out: *Vastarien*. Could this book be a kind of invocation of a world in waiting of genesis? And was it a world at all? Rather the unreal essence of one, all natural elements purged from it by an ineffable process of extraction, all days distilled into dreams and nights into nightmares. Each passage he entered in the book both enchanted and appalled him with images and incidents so freakish and chaotic that his usual sense of these terms disintegrated along with everything else. Rampant oddity seemed to be the rule of the realm, while imperfection was the paradoxical source of idealities—miracles of aberrance and marvels of miscreation. There was horror, undoubtedly. But it was a horror uncompromised by any feeling of lost joy or a thwarted searching for the good. Instead, there was proffered a deliverance by damnation. And if Vastarien was

a nightmare, it was a nightmare transformed in spirit by the utter absence of refuge: nightmare made normal.

“I'm sorry, I didn't see that you had drifted in here,” said the bookseller in a high thin voice. He had just emerged from the inner chamber of the room and was standing with arms folded across his wide chest. “Please don't touch anything. And may I take that from you?” The right arm of the bookseller reached out, then returned to its former place when the man with the pale eyes did not relinquish the merchandise.

“I think I would like to purchase it,” said Keirion. “I'm sure I would, if...”

“Of course, if the price is reasonable,” finished the bookseller. “But who knows, you might not be able to appreciate how valuable these books can be. The one in your hands,” he said, removing a little pad and pencil from inside his jacket and scribbling briefly. He ripped off the top sheet and held it up for the would-be buyer to see, then confidently put away all writing materials, as if that would be the end of it.

“But there must be some latitude for bargaining,” Keirion protested.

“I'm afraid not,” answered the bookseller. “Not with something that is the only one of its kind, as are many of these volumes. Yet the book you are holding, that single copy...”

A hand touched the bookseller's shoulder and seemed to switch off his voice. Then the crow-man stepped into the aisleway, his eyes fixed upon the object under discussion, and asked: “Don't you find that the book is somewhat... difficult?”

“Difficult,” repeated Keirion. “I'm not sure... If you mean that the language is strange, I would have to agree, but—”

“No,” interjected the bookseller, “that's not what he means at all.”

“Excuse us for a moment,” said the crow-man.

Then both men went back into the inner room, where they whispered for some time. When the whispering ceased, the bookseller came forth and announced that there had been a mistake. The book, while something of a curiosity, was worth a good deal less than the price earlier quoted. The revised evaluation, while still costly, was within the means of this particular buyer, who agreed at once to pay it.

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Thus began Victor Keirion's preoccupation with a certain book and a certain hallucinated world, though to make a distinction between these two phenomena ultimately seemed an error. The book, indeed, did not merely describe that strange world but, in some obscure fashion, was a true composition of the thing itself, its very form incarnate.

Each day thereafter he studied the hypnotic episodes of the little book; each night, as he dreamed, he carried out shapeless expeditions into its fantastic topography. To all appearances it seemed he had discovered the summit or abyss of the unreal, that utopia of exhaustion, confusion, and debris where reality ends and where one may dwell among its ruins. And it was not long before he found it necessary to revisit that twelve-sided shop, intending to question the obese bookseller on the matter of the book and unintentionally learning the truth of how it came to be sold.

When he arrived at the bookstore, sometime in the middle of a grayish afternoon, Victor Keirion was surprised to find that the door, which had opened so freely on his previous visit, was now firmly locked. It would not even rattle in its frame when he nervously pushed and pulled on the handle. Since the interior of the store was lighted, he took a coin from his pocket and began tapping on the glass. Finally, someone came forward from the shadows of the back room.

"Closed," the bookseller pantomimed on the other side of the glass.

"But—" Keirion argued, pointing to his wristwatch.

"Nevertheless," the wide man shouted. Then, after scrutinizing the disappointed patron, the bookseller unlocked the door and opened it far enough to carry on a brief conversation. "And what is it I can do for you? I'm closed, so you'll have to come some other time if—"

"I only wanted to ask you something. Do you remember the book that I bought from you some days ago?"

"Yes, I remember," replied the bookseller, as if quite prepared for the question. "And let me say that I was quite impressed, as of course was... the other man."

"Impressed?" Keirion repeated.

"Ecstatic is more the word in his case," continued the bookseller. "He said to me, 'The book has found its reader,' and what could I do but agree with him?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand," said Keirion.

The bookseller blinked and said nothing. After a few moments he reluctantly explained: "I was hoping that by now you would understand. He hasn't contacted you? The man who was in here that day?"

"No, why should he?"

The bookseller blinked again and said: “Well, I suppose there's no reason for you to stand out there. It's getting very cold, don't you feel it? Please come in.” As Victor Keirion entered, the bookseller stuck his head outside, looking up the stairs that led down to his shop and scanning as much of the street above as he could see. Then he closed the door and pulled Keirion a little to one side of it, whispering: “There's just one thing I would like to tell you. I made no mistake the other day about the price of that book. And it was that price which was paid by the other man, minus the small amount that you contributed. I didn't cheat anyone, least of all *him*. He would have been happy to pay even more to get that book into your hands. And though I'm not exactly sure of his reasons, I think you should know that.”

“But why didn't he simply purchase the book for himself?” asked Keirion.

The bookseller seemed confused. “It was of no use to him. Perhaps it would have been better if you hadn't given yourself away when he asked you about the book. How much you knew.”

“But I don't know anything, apart from what I've read in the book itself. I came here to look into its provenance.”

“Its provenance? You're the one who should be telling me about that. I didn't even know I had that book on my shelves. I tried to price it out of your hands, but I should have expected that *he* wouldn't allow that. I'm not asking anything of you, don't misunderstand. I've already violated every precept of discretion in this matter. This is such an exceptional case, though. Very impressive, if in fact you are the reader of that book.”

Realizing that, at best, he had been led into a dialogue of mystification, and possibly one of lies, Victor Keirion had no regrets when the bookseller held the door open for him to leave.

But before long he learned why the bookseller had been so impressed with him, and why the crow-like stranger had been so generous: the bestower of the book who was blind to its mysteries. In due course he learned that the stranger had given only so that he might possess the thing he could gain in no other way, that he was reading the book with borrowed eyes and stealing its secrets from the soul of its rightful reader. At last it became clear what was happening to him, and how his strange nights of dreaming were being affected *from inside*.

This phenomenon was not immediately apparent, though. For several more nights, as the outlines of Vastarien slowly pushed through the obscurity of his sleep, a vast terrain emerged from its own profound slumber and loomed forth from a place without coordinates or dimension. And as the oddly angled monuments became manifest once again, they seemed to expand and soar high above, coaxing his sight toward them. Progressively the scene acquired nuance and articulation; steadily the creation became dense and intricate within its black womb. The streets were sinuous entrails winding through that dark body, and each edifice was the jutting bone of a skeleton hung with a thin musculature of shadows.

But little by little, Victor Keirion began noticing that something was in the course of change during his dreams. The world of Vastarien seemed more and more to be losing its consistency, its *suchness*. Then one night, just as his vis-

ion reached out to embrace fully the mysterious and jagged form of a given dream, it all appeared to pull away, abandoning him on the edge of a dreamless void. The treasured eidolon was receding, shrinking into the distance. Now all he could see was a single street bordered by two converging rows of buildings. And at the opposite end of that street, rising up taller than the buildings themselves, stood a great figure in silhouette. This colossus made no movement or sound but nonetheless increasingly dominated the horizon where the single remaining street seemed to end. From this position the towering shadow was absorbing all other shapes into its own, which gradually gained in stature as the dreamscape withdrew and diminished. And the outline of this titanic figure appeared to be that of a man, yet it was also that of a dark and devouring bird.

Though Victor Keirion managed to awake before the scavenger had thoroughly consumed what was not its own, there was no assurance that he would always be able to do so and that the dream would not pass into the hands of another. And so he conceived and executed the act that was necessary to keep possession of what he had desired for so long.

Vastarien, he whispered as he stood in the shadows and moonlight of that bare little room, where a monolithic metal door prevented his escape. Within that door a small square of thick glass was implanted so that he might be watched by day and by night. And there was an unbending web of heavy wire covering the window which overlooked the city that was *not* Vastarien. *Never*, chanted a voice which might have been his own. Then more insistently: *I told him that. I told him. Never, never, never.*

When the door opened and some men in uniforms entered the room, they found Victor Keirion screaming to the raucous limits of his voice and trying to scale the thick metal mesh veiling the window, as if he were dragging himself along some unlikely route of liberation. Of course, they pulled him to the floor; and they stretched him out upon the bed, where his wrists and ankles were tightly strapped. Then through the doorway strode a nurse who carried a slender syringe crowned with a silvery needle.

During the injection he continued to scream words which everyone in the room had heard before, each outburst developing the theme of his unjust confinement: how the man he had murdered was using him in a horrible way, a way impossible to explain or make credible. The man could not read the book—there, *that* book—and was stealing the dreams which the book had spawned. *Stealing my dreams*, he mumbled softly as the drug began to take effect. *Stealing my...*

The stewards of Victor Keirion's incarceration remained around his bed for a few moments, silently staring at its restrained occupant. Then one of them pointed to the book and initiated a conversation now familiar to them all.

“What should we do with it? It's been taken away enough times already, but then there's always another that appears.”

“And there's no point to it. Look at these pages—nothing, nothing written anywhere.”

“So why does he sit reading them for hours? He does nothing else.”

“I think it's time we told someone in authority.”

“Of course, we could do that, but what exactly would we say? That a certain inmate should be forbidden from reading

a certain book? That he becomes violent?"

"And then they'll ask why we can't keep the book away from him or him from the book. What should we say to that?"

"There would be nothing we could say. Can you imagine what lunatics we would seem? As soon as we opened our mouths, that would be it for all of us."

"And when someone asks what the book means to him, or even what its name is... what would be our answer?"

As if in response to this question, a word was uttered by the criminally insane creature bound to the bed. But none of them could understand the meaning of what he had said. They were part of a world of overbearing and yet deficient realities. They were shackled for life to their own bodies, while he was now in a place that owed nothing to corporeal existence.

And never, it truly seemed, could he be forced to abandon this domain of wayward wonders. *Never*.

Vastarien (1987 Crypt Of Cthulhu Version)

First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu* #48, 1987
Same version as 1989 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer

Within the blackness of his sleep a few lights began to glow like candles in a cloistered cell. Their illumination was unsteady and dim, issuing from no definite source. Nonetheless, he now discovered many shapes beneath the shadows: tall buildings whose rooftops nodded groundward, wide buildings whose façades seemed to follow the curve of a street, dark buildings whose windows and doorways tilted like badly hung paintings. And even if he found himself unable to fix his own location in this scene, he knew where his dreams had delivered him once more.

Even as the warped structures multiplied in his vision, crowding the lost distance, he possessed a sense of intimacy with each of them, a peculiar knowledge of the spaces within them and of the streets which coiled themselves around their mass. Once again he knew the depths of their foundations, where an obscure life seemed to establish itself, a secret civilization of echoes flourishing among groaning walls. Yet upon his probing more extensively into such interiors, certain difficulties presented themselves: stairways that wandered off-course into useless places; caged elevators that urged unwanted stops on their passengers; thin ladders

ascending into a maze of shafts and conduits, the dark valves and arteries of a petrified and monstrous organism.

And he knew that every corner of this corroded world was prolific with choices, even if they had to be made blindly in a place where clear consequences and a hierarchy of possibilities were lacking. For there might be a room whose shabby and soundless decor exudes a desolate serenity which at first attracts the visitor, who then discovers certain figures enveloped in plush furniture, figures that do not move or speak but only stare; and, concluding that these weary mannikins have exercised a bizarre indulgence in repose, the visitor must ponder the alternatives: to linger or to leave?

Eluding the claustral enchantments of such rooms, his gaze now roamed the streets of this dream. He scanned the altitudes beyond the high sloping roofs: there the stars seemed to be no more than silvery cinders which showered up from the mouths of great chimneys and clung to something dark and dense looming above, something that closed in upon each black horizon. It appeared to him that certain high towers nearly breached this sagging blackness, stretching themselves nightward to attain the farthest possible remove from the world below. And toward the peak of one of the highest towers he spied vague silhouettes that moved hectically in a bright window, twisting and leaning upon the glass like shadow-puppets in the fever of some mad dispute.

Through the mazy streets his vision slowly glided, as if carried along by a sluggish draft. Darkened windows reflected the beams of stars and streetlamps; lighted windows, however dim their glow, betrayed strange scenes which were left behind long before their full mystery could overwhelm the dreaming traveller. He wandered into thoroughfares

more remote, soaring past cluttered gardens and crooked gates, drifting alongside an expansive wall that seemed to border an abyss, and floating over bridges that arched above the black purling waters of canals.

Near a certain street corner, a place of supernatural clarity and stillness, he saw two figures standing beneath the crystalline glaze of a lamp ensconsed high upon a wall of carved stone. Their shadows were perfect columns of blackness upon the livid pavement; their faces were a pair of faded masks concealing profound schemes. And they seemed to have lives of their own, with no awareness of their dreaming observer, who wished only to live with these specters and know their dreams, to remain in this place where everything was transfixed in the order of the unreal.

Never again, it seemed, could he be forced to abandon this realm of beautiful shadows.

Victor Keirion awoke with a brief convulsion of his limbs, as if he had been chaotically scrambling to break his fall from an imaginary height. For a moment he held his eyes closed, hoping to preserve the dissipating euphoria of the dream. Finally he blinked once or twice.

Moonlight through a curtainless window allowed him the image of his outstretched arms and his somewhat twisted hands. Releasing his awkward hold on the edge of the sheeted mattress, he rolled onto his back. Then he groped around until his fingers found the cord dangling from the light above the bed. A small, barely furnished room appeared.

He pushed himself up and reached toward the painted metal nightstand. Through the spaces between his fingers he saw the pale gray binding of a book and some of the dark let-

ters tooled upon its cover: V, S, R, N. Suddenly he withdrew his hand without touching the book, for the magical intoxication of the dream had died, and he feared that he would not be able to revive it.

Freeing himself from the coarse bedcovers, he sat at the edge of the mattress, elbows resting on his legs and hands loosely folded. His hair and eyes were pale, his complexion rather grayish, suggesting the color of certain clouds or that of long confinement. The single window in the room was only a few steps away, but he kept himself from approaching it, from even glancing in its direction. He knew exactly what he would see at that time of night: tall buildings, wide buildings, dark buildings, a scattering of stars and lights, and some lethargic movement in the streets below.

In so many ways the city outside the window was a semblance of that other place, which now seemed impossibly far off and inaccessible. But the likeness was evident only to his inner vision, only in the recollected images he formed when his eyes were closed or out of focus. It would be difficult to conceive of a creature for whom this world—its bare form seen with open eyes—represented a coveted paradise.

Now standing before the window, his hands tearing into the pockets of a papery bathrobe, he saw that something was missing from the view, some crucial property that was denied to the stars above and the streets below, some unearthly essence needed to save them. The word *unearthly* reverberated in the room. In that place and at that hour, the paradoxical absence, the missing quality, became clear to him: it was the element of the unreal.

For Victor Keirion belonged to that wretched sect of souls who believe that the only value of this world lies in its power

—at certain times—to suggest another world. Nevertheless, the place he now surveyed through the high window could never be anything but the most gauzy phantom of that other place, nothing save a shadowy mimic of the anatomy of that great dream. And although there were indeed times when one might be deceived, isolated moments when a gift for disguise triumphs, the impersonation could never be perfect or lasting. No true challenge to the rich unreality of Vastarien, where every shape suggested a thousand others, every sound disseminated everlasting echoes, every word founded a world. No horror, no joy was the equal of the abysmally vibrant sensations known in this place that was elsewhere, this spellbinding retreat where all experiences were interwoven to compose fantastic textures of feeling, a fine and dark tracery of limitless patterns. For everything in the unreal points to the infinite, and everything in Vastarien was unreal, unbounded by the tangible lie of existing. Even its most humble aspects proclaimed this truth: what door, he wondered, in any other world could imply the abundant and strange possibilities that belonged to the entrancing doors in the dream?

Then, as he focused his eyes upon a distant part of the city, he recalled a particular door, one of the least suggestive objects he had ever confronted, intimating little of what lay beyond.

It was a rectangle of smudged glass within another rectangle of scuffed wood, a battered thing lodged within a brick wall at the bottom of a stairway leading down from a crumbling street. And it pushed easily inward, merely a delicate formality between the underground shop and the outside world. Inside was an open room vaguely circular in shape,

unusual in seeming more like the lobby of an old hotel than a bookstore. The circumference of the room was composed of crowded bookshelves whose separate sections were joined to one another to create an irregular polygon of eleven sides, with a long desk standing where a twelfth would have been. Beyond the desk stood a few more bookshelves arranged in aisles, their monotonous length leading into shadows. At the furthest point from this end of the shop, he began his circuit of the shelves, which appeared so promising in their array of old and ruddy bindings, like remnants of some fabulous autumn.

Very soon, however, the promise was betrayed and the mystique of the Librairie de Grimoires, in accord with his expectations, was stripped away to reveal, in his eyes, a sideshow of charlatanry. For this disillusionment he had only himself to blame. Moreover, he could barely articulate the nature of the discrepancy between what he had hoped to find and what he actually found in such places. Aside from this hope, there was little basis for his belief that there existed some other arcana, one of a different kind altogether from that proffered by the books before him, all of which were sodden with an obscene reality, falsely hermetic ventures which consisted of circling the same absurd landscape. The other worlds portrayed in these books inevitably served as annexes of this one; they were impostors of the authentic unreality which was the only realm of redemption, however gruesome it might appear. And it was this *terminal* landscape that he sought, not those rituals of the "way" that never arrives, heavens or hells that are mere pretexts for circumnavigating the real and revelling in it. For he dreamed of strange volumes that turned away from all earthly light to become

lost in their own nightmares, pages that preached a nocturnal salvation, a liturgy of shadows, catechism of phantoms. His absolute: to dwell among the ruins of reality.

And it seemed to surpass all probability that there existed no precedent for this dream, no elaboration of this vision into a word, a delirious bible that would be the blight of all others—a scripture that would begin in apocalypse and lead its disciple to the wreck of all creation.

He had, in fact, come upon passages in certain books that approached this ideal, hinting to the reader—almost admonishing him—that the page before his eyes was about to offer a view from the abyss and cast a wavering light on desolate hallucinations. *To become the wind in the dead of winter*, so might begin an enticing verse of dreams. But soon the bemazed visionary would falter, retracting the promised scene of a shadow kingdom at the end of all entity, perhaps offering an apologetics for this lapse into the unreal. The work would then once more take up the universal theme, disclosing its true purpose in belaboring the most futile and profane of all ambitions: power, with knowledge as its drudge. The vision of a disastrous enlightenment, of a catastrophic illumination, was conjured up in passing and then cast aside. What remained was invariably a metaphysics as systematically trivial and debased as the physical laws it purported to transcend, a manual outlining the path to some hypothetical state of absolute glory. What remained lost was the revelation that nothing ever known has ended in glory; that all which ends does so in exhaustion, in confusion, and debris.

Nevertheless, a book that contained even a false gesture toward his truly eccentric absolute might indeed serve his

purpose. Directing the attention of a bookseller to selected contents of such books, he would say: “I have an interest in a certain subject area, perhaps you will see... that is, I wonder, do you know of other, what should I say, sources that you would be able to recommend for my...”

Occasionally he was referred to another bookseller or to the owner of a private collection. And ultimately he would be forced to realize that he had been grotesquely misunderstood when he found himself on the fringe of a society devoted to some strictly demonic enterprise.

The very bookshop in which he was now browsing represented only the most recent digression in a search without progress. But he had learned to be cautious and would try to waste as little time as possible in discovering if there was anything hidden for him here. Certainly not on the shelves which presently surrounded him.

“Have you seen our friend?” asked a nearby voice, startling him somewhat. Victor Keirion turned to face the stranger. The man was rather small and wore a black overcoat; his hair was also black and fell loosely across his forehead. Besides his general appearance, there was also something about his presence that made one think of a crow, a scavenging creature in wait. “Has he come out of his hole?” the man asked, gesturing toward the empty desk and the dark area behind it.

“I'm sorry, I haven't seen anyone,” Keirion replied. “I only now noticed you.”

“I can't help being quiet. Look at these little feet,” the man said, pointing to a highly polished pair of black shoes. Without thinking, Keirion looked down; then, feeling duped, he looked up again at the smiling stranger.

“You look very bored,” said the human crow.

“I'm sorry?”

“Never mind. I can see that I'm bothering you.” Then the man walked away, his coat flapping slightly, and began browsing some distant bookshelves. “I've never seen you in here before,” he said from across the room.

“I've never been in here before,” Keirion answered.

“Have you ever read this?” the stranger asked, pulling down a book and holding up its wordless black cover.

“Never,” Keirion replied without so much as glancing at the book. Somehow this seemed the best action to take with this character, who appeared to be foreign in some indefinable way, intangibly alien.

“Well, you must be looking for something special,” continued the other man, replacing the black book on its shelf. “And I know what that's like, when you're looking for something very special. Have you ever heard of a book, an extremely special book, that is not… yes, that is not *about* something, but actually *is* that something?”

For the first time the obnoxious stranger had managed to intrigue Keirion rather than annoy him. “That sounds … ,” he started to say, but then the other man exclaimed:

“There he is, there he is. Excuse me.”

It seemed that the proprietor—that mutual friend—had finally made his appearance and was now standing behind the desk, looking toward his two customers. “My friend,” said the crow-man as he stepped with outstretched hand over to the smoothly bald and softly fat gentleman. The two of them briefly shook hands; they whispered for a few moments. Then the crow-man was invited behind the desk, and —led by the heavy, unsmiling bookseller—made his way into

the darkness at the back of the shop. In a distant corner of that darkness the brilliant rectangle of a doorway suddenly flashed into outline, admitting through its frame a large, two-headed shadow.

Left alone among the worthless volumes of that shop, Victor Keirion felt the sad frustration of the uninvited, the abandoned. More than ever he had become infected with hopes and curiosities of an indeterminable kind. And he soon found it impossible to remain outside that radiant little room the other two had entered, and on whose threshold he presently stood in silence.

The room was a cramped bibliographic cubicle within which stood another cubicle formed by free-standing bookcases, creating four very narrow aisleways in the space between them. From the doorway he could not see how the inner cubicle might be entered, but he heard the voices of the others whispering within.

Stepping quietly, he began making his way along the perimeter of the room, his eyes voraciously scanning a wealth of odd-looking volumes.

Immediately he sensed that something of a special nature awaited his discovery, and the evidence for this intuition began to build. Each book that he examined served as a clue in this delirious investigation, a cryptic sign which engaged his powers of interpretation and imparted the faith to proceed. Many of the works were written in foreign languages he did not read; some appeared to be composed in ciphers based on familiar characters and others seemed to be transcribed in a wholly artificial cryptography. But in everyone of these books he found an oblique guidance, some feature of more or less indirect significance: a strangeness in the

typeface, pages and bindings of uncommon texture, abstract diagrams suggesting no orthodox ritual or occult system. Even greater anticipation was inspired by certain illustrated plates, mysterious drawings and engravings that depicted scenes and situations unlike anything he could name. And such works as *Cynothoglys* or *The Noctuary of Tine* conveyed schemes so bizarre, so remote from known texts and treatises of the esoteric tradition, that he felt assured of the sense of his quest.

The whispering grew louder, though no more distinct, as he edged around a corner of that inner cubicle and anxiously noted the opening at its far end. At the same time he was distracted, for no apparent reason, by a small grayish volume leaning within a gap between larger and more garish tomes. The little book had been set upon the highest shelf, making it necessary for him to stretch himself, as if on an upright torture rack, to reach it. Trying not to give away his presence by the sounds of his pain, he finally secured the ashen-colored object—as pale as his own coloring—between the tips of his first two fingers.

Mutely he strained to slide it quietly from its place; this act accomplished, he slowly shrunk down to his original stature and looked into the book's brittle pages.

It seemed to be a chronicle of strange dreams. Yet somehow the passages he examined were less a recollection of unruled visions than a tangible incarnation of them, not mere rhetoric but the thing itself. The use of language in the book was arrantly unnatural and the book's author unknown. Indeed, the text conveyed the impression of speaking for itself and speaking only to itself, the words flowing together like shadows that were cast by no forms outside the book. But al-

though this volume appeared to be composed in a vernacular of mysteries, its words did inspire a sure understanding and created in their reader a visceral apprehension of the world they described, existing inseparable from it. Could this truly be the invocation of Vastarien, that improbable world to which those gnarled letters on the front of the book alluded? And was it a world at all?

Rather the unreal essence of one, all natural elements purged by an occult process of extraction, all days distilled into dreams and nights into nightmares. Each passage he entered in the book both enchanted and appalled him with images and incidents so freakish and chaotic that his usual sense of these terms disintegrated along with everything else. Rampant oddity seemed to be the rule of the realm; imperfection became the source of the miraculous—wonders of deformity and marvels of miscreation. There was horror, undoubtedly. But it was a horror uncompromised by any feeling of lost joy or thwarted redemption; rather, it was a deliverance by damnation. And if Vastarien was a nightmare, it was a nightmare transformed in spirit by the utter absence of refuge: nightmare made normal.

“I'm sorry, I didn't see that you had drifted in here,” said the bookseller in a high thin voice. He had just emerged from the inner chamber of the room and was standing with arms folded across his wide chest. “Please don't touch anything. And may I take that from you?” The right arm of the bookseller reached out, then returned to its former place when the man with the pale eyes did not relinquish the merchandise.

“I think I would like to purchase it,” said Keirion. “I'm sure I would, if. ...”

“Of course, if the price is reasonable,” finished the bookseller. “But who knows, you might not be able to understand how valuable these books can be. That one…” he said, removing a little pad and pencil from inside his jacket and scribbling briefly. He ripped off the top sheet and held it up for the would-be buyer to see, then confidently put away all writing materials, as if that would be the end of it.

“But there must be some latitude for bargaining,” Keirion protested.

“I'm afraid not,” answered the bookseller. “Not with something that is the only one of its kind, as are many of these volumes. Yet that one book you are holding, that single copy…”

A hand touched the bookseller's shoulder and seemed to switch off his voice.

Then the crow-man stepped into the aisleway, his eyes fixed upon the object under discussion, and asked: “Don't you find that the book is somewhat… difficult?”

“Difficult,” repeated Keirion. “I'm not sure… If you mean that the language is strange, I would have to agree, but—”

“No,” interjected the bookseller, “that's not what he means at all.”

“Excuse us for a moment,” said the crow-man.

Then both men went back into the inner room, where they whispered for some time.

When the whispering ceased, the bookseller came forth and announced that there had been a mistake. The book, while something of a curiosity, was worth a good deal less than the price earlier quoted. The revised evaluation, while still costly, was nevertheless within the means of this particular buyer, who agreed at once to pay it.

Thus began Victor Keirion's preoccupation with a certain book and a certain hallucinated world, though to make a distinction between these two phenomena ultimately seemed an error: the book, indeed, did not merely describe that strange world but, in some obscure fashion, was a true composition of the thing itself, its very form incarnate.

Each day thereafter he studied the hypnotic episodes of the little book; each night, as he dreamed, he carried out shapeless expeditions into its fantastic topography. To all appearances it seemed he had discovered the summit or abyss of the unreal, that paradise of exhaustion, confusion, and debris where reality ends and where one may dwell among its ruins. And it was not long before he found it necessary to revisit that twelve-sided shop, intending to question the obese bookseller on the subject of the book and unintentionally learning the truth of how it came to be sold.

When he arrived at the bookstore, sometime in the middle of a grayish afternoon, Victor Keirion was surprised to find that the door, which had opened so freely on his previous visit, was now firmly locked. It would not even rattle in its frame when he nervously pushed and pulled on the handle. Since the interior of the store was lighted, he took a coin from his pocket and began tapping on the glass. Finally, someone came forward from the shadows of the back room.

“Closed,” the bookseller pantomimed on the other side of the glass.

“But...” Keirion argued, pointing to his wristwatch.

“Nevertheless,” the wide man shouted. Then, after scrutinizing the disappointed patron, the bookseller unlocked the door and opened it far enough to carry on a brief conver-

sation. “And what is it I can do for you. I'm closed, so you'll have to come some other time if—”

“I only wanted to ask you something. Do you remember the book that I bought from you not long ago, the one—”

“Yes, I remember,” replied the bookseller, as if quite prepared for the question. “And let me say that I was quite impressed, as of course was… the other man.”

“Impressed?” Keirion repeated.

“Flabbergasted is more the word in his case,” continued the bookseller. “He said to me, ‘The book has found its reader,’ and what could I do but agree with him?”

“I'm afraid I don't understand,” said Keirion.

The bookseller blinked and said nothing. After a few moments he reluctantly explained: “I was hoping that by now you would understand. He hasn't contacted you? The man who was in here that day?”

“No, why should he?”

The bookseller blinked again and said: “Well, I suppose there's no reason you need to stand out there. It's getting very cold, don't you feel it?” Then he closed the door and pulled Keirion a little to one side of it, whispering: “There's just one thing I would like to tell you. I made no mistake that day about the price of that book. And it was the price—in full—which was paid by the other man, don't ask me anything else about him. That price, of course, minus the small amount that you yourself contributed. I didn't cheat anyone, least of all *him*. He would have been happy to pay even more to get that book into your hands. And although I'm not exactly sure of his reasons, I think you should know that.”

“But why didn't he simply purchase the book for himself?” asked Keirion.

The bookseller seemed confused. “It was of no use to him. Perhaps it would have been better if you hadn't given yourself away when he asked you about the book. How much you knew.”

“But I don't know anything, apart from what I've read in the book itself. I came here to find—”

“—Nothing, I'm afraid. You're the one who should be telling me, very impressive. But I'm not asking, don't misunderstand. And there's nothing more I can tell you, since I've already violated every precept of discretion. This is such an exceptional case, though. Very impressive, if in fact you are the reader of that book.”

Realizing that, at best, he had been led into a dialogue of mystification, and possibly one of lies, Victor Keirion had no regrets when the bookseller held the door open for him to leave.

But before very many days, and especially nights, had passed he learned why the bookseller had been so impressed with him, and why the crowlike stranger had been so generous: the bestower of the book who was blind to its mysteries. In the course of those days, those nights, he learned that the stranger had given only so that he might possess the thing he could gain in no other way, that he was reading the book with borrowed eyes and stealing its secrets from the soul of its rightful reader. At last it became clear what was happening to him throughout those strange nights of dreaming.

On each of those nights the shapes of Vastarien slowly pushed through the obscurity of his sleep, a vast landscape emerging from its own profound slumber and drifting forth from a place without name or dimension. And as the crooked monuments became manifest once again, they

seemed to expand and soar high above him, drawing his vision toward them. Progressively the scene acquired nuance and articulation; steadily the creation became dense and intricate within its black womb: the streets were sinuous entrails winding through that dark body, and each edifice was the jutting bone of a skeleton hung with a thin musculature of shadows.

But just as his vision reached out to embrace fully the mysterious and jagged form of the dream, it all appeared to pull away, abandoning him on the edge of a dreamless void. The landscape was receding, shrinking into the distance. Now all he could see was a single street bordered by two converging rows of buildings.

And at the opposite end of that street, rising up taller than the buildings themselves, stood a great figure in silhouette. This looming colossus made no movement or sound but firmly dominated the horizon where the single remaining street seemed to end. From this position the towering shadow was absorbing all other shapes into its own, which gradually was gaining in stature as the landscape withdrew and diminished. And the outline of this titanic figure appeared to be that of a man, yet it was also that of a dark and devouring bird.

Although for several nights Victor Keirion managed to awake before the scavenger had thoroughly consumed what was not its own, there was no assurance that he would always be able to do so and that the dream would not pass into the hands of another. Ultimately, he conceived and executed the act that was necessary to keep possession of the dream he had coveted for so long.

Vastarien, he whispered as he stood in the shadows and moonlight of that bare little room, where a massive metal door prevented his escape.

Within that door a small square of thick glass was implanted so that he might be watched by day and by night. And there was an unbending web of heavy wire covering the window which overlooked the city that was *n*ot Vastarien. Never, chanted a voice which might have been his own. Then more insistently: *never*, *never*, *never*…

When the door was opened and some men in uniforms entered the room, they found Victor Keirion screaming to the raucous limits of his voice and trying to scale the thick metal mesh veiling the window, as if he were dragging himself along some unlikely route of liberation. Of course, they pulled him to the floor; they stretched him out upon the bed, where his wrists and ankles were tightly strapped. Then through the doorway strode a nurse who carried a slender syringe crowned with a silvery needle.

During the injection he continued to scream words which everyone in the room had heard before, each outburst developing the theme of his unjust confinement: how the man he had murdered was using him in a horrible way, a way impossible to explain or make credible. The man could not read the book—there, *tha*t book—and was stealing the dreams which the book had spawned. *Stealing my dreams*, he mumbled softly as the drug began to take effect. *Stealing my*…

The group remained around the bed for a few moments, silently staring at its restrained occupant. Then one of them pointed to the book and initiated a conversation now familiar to them all.

“What should we do with it? It's been taken away enough times already, but then there's always another that appears.”

“And there's no point to it. Look at these pages—nothing, nothing written anywhere.”

“So why does he sit reading them for hours? He does nothing else.”

“I think it's time we told someone in authority.”

“Of course, we could do that, but what exactly would we say? That a certain inmate should be forbidden from reading a certain book? That he becomes violent?”

“And then they'll ask why we can't keep the book away from him or him from the book? What should we say to that?”

“There would be nothing we could say. Can you imagine what lunatics we would seem? As soon as we opened our mouths, that would be it for all of us.”

“And when someone asks what the book means to him, or even what its name is… what would be our answer?”

As if in response to this question, a few shapeless groans arose from the criminally insane creature who was bound to the bed. But no one could understand the meaning of the word or words that he uttered, least of all himself. For he was now far from his own words, buried deep within the dreams of a place where everything was transfixed in the order of the unreal; and whence, it truly seemed, he would never return.

The Real Wolf (1988 Nocturne Version)

First published in *Nocturne* #1, 1988

Tonight shall be the first time we—that is, I—take the life of a human being. Can you read my thoughts, Moon, so full you're about to spill your whiteness all over the sky like a clumsy child? Can you see into my heart with your big pearly eye? That's how I love to see you, Moon, doming out of the blackness. And what do you think of how I look when you become all round up there? Oh, you're shining very nicely down into my alley hideaway, garnished as it is with winter's frozen spume. See how my blemished flesh flowers into perfectly silver-white fur; see how my flat face pushes itself into an elegant snout; see my eyes get bright and keen; see my legs go lean! From tooth to tail: a wolf. Not simply a werewolf; I am more than a split personality. I am now whole, undivided—one solid piece of walking wolf. Not merely *a* wolf, not even *the* wolf. But just Wolf. We are—I *am* —Wolf. Hear my howl.

Shine, Moon, shine on your moonchild.

Ah, there it is, there's what I've been waiting for. The music, that Great Concert I always hear playing whenever I take this form. Do ordinary animals detect the sound of this distant symphony, I wonder? Perhaps only the ones whose ears are acute little points that prick up at the faintest tingling. Like mine do. The music is indefinite in a very definite way, vague but with all the clarity of the stars. To my ears it is

powerful enough to drown out the sound of nearby traffic and other earthly noises, though it is so curiously quiet, quiet and steady as one's own heartbeat, the music seems to be throbbing and humming through the hollows of space: a fine bow singing across the invisible paths of planets, a needlelike vibration ringing the silver bells of galaxies, golden tones sent up into the towering pipes of infinity. A triad, innumerable systems of triads, all calling down to me with one tremulous voice. It is like no music I have ever heard as a human being. And I hope you, Moon, can hear it too!

The music inspires and encourages me to kill a human tonight. Their senses are too gross to perceive the music, and for this reason alone they should be slaughtered. They are slaves to the moral miseries of their humanness—they are all deliberation and no liberation! Idiots, they mourn the extinction of their beauties and their loves—their pitiful vices—as if these were anything but futile illusions. And such illusions only breed other, more horrible, fantasies: pain, isolation, and ultimate annihilation. These things only happen to those who do not understand the Divine Mania, the animating force whose voice is that spine-freezing music—the Great Concert—and whose face is all things. This mania bids me kill and I obey, because *I am* it. It can never die, though it loves playing death, playing possum, rabbit, pouncing cat... prowling wolf! It loves to die, lives to die. It is invincible. You understand perfectly, don't you Moon? With icy brightness you yourself radiate the mania, the moon-mania that visits me whenever you reach the phase of fullness.

For you, then, I will kill my first human. Not that this is such an exceptional gift to bestow. A human is nothing spe-

cial, merely another two-legged creature that bleeds. And as you know, Moon, I have already tasted their blood. You knew about my little escapades in the park even before they were reported in the newspapers: how I mauled a few strollers down by the frozen pond. To confess the truth, it was my intention to finish them off, but for some reason I didn't. Something about the taste of their blood when I opened one of their arms or legs. It is not like the blood of mice, of birds, or even of cats. These humans have bad blood, like some kind of poison, it seems. But that is ridiculous, for blood is blood. Their bodies run with the same singing river that flows in other animals. And I shall drink from it tonight I promise you, Moon.

Perhaps, though, I should work toward the human river by way of the beast's. There, I hear something rattling around the snow-stiffened debris back in the depths of this blind alley. A rat. An alley rat for an alley wolf. Where are you, nice little rat? Sweet little rat. I'm here to liberate you from your lowly rattiness. In a few moments you shall find ecstacy in my jaws. Listen to the Great Concert; it's calling you home, Rat. There it goes, scurrying, scrambling, scuttling—Got it! Well, Rat, you can make music of your own as my teeth play on your flesh. But now you grow quiet, and I can detect the strains of the Great Concert swelling a little louder as another being goes to join in that orchestral unity. I will have to find other things to play with, once I emerge from my alley lair.

I know, I know, Moon; I'm keeping to the back streets, where it's safe and lonely for a lone wolf. There's no one around here who can do me any harm. Do you really think the humans who live in these dilapidated shacks are clever

enough to threaten a creature that can change its shape and nature the way you go through your phases, the way the year shifts its seasons, the way this world spins from day to darkness? And how much more swiftly can I perform my transformation! Besides, in the snow-encrusted gloom of this slum I look just like a big dog.

And just as the thought of dogs crosses my mind, what breed of four-footed silhouette is that up there crossing the street in the distance? It looks like a half-starved stray; I've seen them before around here. Easy prey for a strong strutter of the streets. Why is it trotting faster now? Doesn't it know I only want to free its spirit from that pathetically bony frame? Listen to the music, my dear Dog. The Divine Mania is now conducting the band, which is about to reach one of those countless little crescendos of death. Don't bother to look behind you as you pace faster and faster down the street; you will only see your own image in a mirror. For the Divine Mania is not *murder* but self-slaughter, suicide. And suicide needs mirrors. We are much more than mere cousin-creatures, Dog and Wolf. We are two tiny shards of a mirror that has been shattered infinitely and is always looking at itself. Isn't that wonderful, dear Dog? And I see that you understand, because now you are slowing down to take a good look in the mirror, falling exhausted against this filthy snowdrift and staring up into my eyes. No, my twin, take a good look! It's too bad you cannot see how beautiful your red blood glistens on the white snow in the moonlight. This is one of your better moments, Moon. You can create marvelous effects with a beast's blood. But now this moonchild is ready for higher things.

The gates at the north end are open, all pearled with white ice. Nice to be welcomed to this island of wilderness beyond which loom the prison towers of the city. I hate them. Especially that horribly massive building called the library, where one of the lowest creatures in all the city's human population is incarcerated by day in a prison of books. Ah, but didn't some of those books locked in a special basement vault help him to become what he is now. And now he roams by night. A liberated moonchild.

I vow to you, Moon, I shall liberate more human hearts this night. They congregate like bugs by that light in the distance where night-skaters glide mindlessly across the frozen pond. I have drawn blood here before, so let them be warned: I am back and am burning with the Divine Mania. I want to take life from these miserable and arrogant creatures; they do not deserve it. They are in bondage to their beauties and their loves, but they do not even love death and do not see how beautiful it is. They cannot even hear the Great Concert! They are afraid of its savage music, its icy liberation, its lyrical purity. For such creatures, living is only a dead end, and now I will chase a few of them to the *very* end of that blind alley.

Oh, what perfection. I can't believe my undeceiveable eyes. There stands my first victim, alone in the frosty clearing. With that outfit she is begging for harm: bright red coat, bright red cap, and bright red boots. Soon the sparkling snow will be spread with red. This is the essence of all my dreams. The moon is shining gloriously on the scene, the

trees are heavy with diamond ice, and all is stillness. I am in fairyland.

Closer. (Why doesn't she run?) Closer. (Why doesn't she scream?) Closer. (Why does she not even move?) The only stirring thing is her red scarf flapping in the chill wind.

Closer, closer, closer—Spring on her. Now!

What are those noises, why have I fallen into the snow, and why do I feel this terrible pain? Run, Wolf, run. I can't, I can't. Oh, I have delivered myself to deception. The child hasn't moved, only her clothes flutter in the cruel breath of this winter night. How could I have been fooled by this false image? A real wolf would not have been deceived. A real wolf would have seen those hunters hiding among the trees. I shouldn't have tried to kill in the same place twice.

Now my beautiful silver fur is stained with hideous red, and I am beautiful no more. I am not even a real wolf. A real wolf would not feel so sad for itself. Oh, why do I have to die like this. I don't want to die; there's only *one* of me. I can feel myself changing back into my original form. How wide their eyes grow, those gazing groundward upon my transfigured shape. How pleased they are to see me perish, humbled at the feet of brute humanity. My heart is slowing down, and the music… the music is gone.

Here, Moon, here is the life I promised you.

The Sect Of The Idiot (2010 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu #56*, 1988

> The primal chaos, Lord of all... the blind idiot god—Azathoth.
>
> —*Necronomicon*

The extraordinary is a province of the solitary soul. Lost the very moment the crowd comes into view, it remains within the great hollows of dreams, an infinitely secluded place that prepares itself for your arrival, and for mine. Extraordinary joy, extraordinary pain—the fearful poles of a world that both menaces and surpasses this one. It is a miraculous hell towards which one unknowingly wanders. And its gate, in my case, was an old town whose allegiance to the unreal inspired my soul with a holy madness long before my body had come to dwell in that incomparable place.

Soon after arriving in the town—whose identity, along with my own, it is best not to bring to light—I was settled in a high room overlooking the ideal of my dreams through diamond panes. How many times had I already lingered in

mind before these windows and roamed in reverie the streets I now gazed upon below.

I discovered an infinite stillness on foggy mornings, miracles of silence on indolent afternoons, and the strangely flickering tableau of neverending nights. A sense of serene enclosure was conveyed by every aspect of the old town. There were balconies, railed porches, and jutting upper stories of shops and houses that created intermittent arcades over sidewalks. Colossal roofs overhung entire streets and transformed them into the corridors of a single structure containing an uncanny multitude of rooms. And these fantastic crowns were echoed below by lesser roofs that drooped above windows like half-closed eyelids and turned each narrow doorway into a magician's cabinet harboring deceptive depths of shadow.

It is difficult to explain, then, how the old town also conveyed an impression of endlessness, of proliferating unseen dimensions, at the same time that it served as the very image of a claustrophobe's nightmare. Even the nights above the great roofs of the town seemed merely the uppermost level of an earthbound estate, at most an old attic in which the stars were useless heirlooms and the moon a dusty trunk of dreams. And this paradox was precisely the source of the town's enchantment. I imagined the heavens themselves as part of an essentially interior decor. By day: heaps of clouds like dust balls floated across the empty rooms of the sky. By night: a fluorescent map of the cosmos was painted upon a great black ceiling. How I ached to live forever in this province of medieval autumns and mute winters, serving out my sentence of life among all the visible and invisible wonders I had only dreamed about from so far away.

But no existence, however visionary, is without its trials and traps.

After only a few days in the old town, I had been made acutely sensitive by the solitude of the place and by the solitary manner of my life. Late one afternoon I was relaxing in a chair beside those kaleidoscopic windows when there was a knock at the door. It was only the faintest of knocks, but so unanticipated was this elementary event, and so developed was my sensitivity, that it seemed like some unwonted upheaval of atmospheric forces, a kind of cataclysm of empty space, an earthquake in the invisible. Hesitantly I walked across the room and stood before the door, which was only a simple brown slab without molding around its frame. I opened it.

"Oh," said the little man waiting in the hallway outside. He had neatly groomed silver hair and strikingly clear eyes. "This is embarrassing. I must have been given the wrong address. The handwriting on this note is such chaos." He looked at the crumpled piece of paper in his hand. "Ha! Never mind, I'll go back and check."

However, the man did not immediately leave the scene of his embarrassment; instead, he pushed himself upwards on the points of his tiny shoes and stared over my shoulder into my room. His entire body, compact as it was in stature, seemed to be in a state of concentrated excitement. Finally he said, "Beautiful view from your room," and he smiled a very tight little smile.

"Yes, it is," I replied, glancing back into the room and not really knowing what to think. When I turned around the man was gone.

For a few startled moments I did not move. Then I stepped into the hallway and gazed up and down its dim length. It was not very wide, nor did it extend a great distance before turning a windowless corner. All the doors to the other rooms were closed, and not the slightest noise emerged from any of them. At last I heard what sounded like footsteps descending flights of stairs on the floors below, faintly echoing through the silence, speaking the quiet language of old rooming houses. I felt relieved and returned to my room.

The rest of the day was uneventful, though somewhat colored by a whole spectrum of imaginings. And that night I experienced a very strange dream, the culmination, it seemed, of both my lifetime of dreaming and of my dream-like sojourn in the old town. Certainly my view of the town was thereafter dramatically transformed. And yet, despite the nature of the dream, this change was not immediately for the worse.

In the dream I occupied a small dark room, a high room whose windows looked out on a maze of streets which unraveled beneath an abyss of stars. But though the stars were spread across a great reaching blackness, the streets below were bathed in a stale gray dimness which suggested neither night nor day nor any natural phase between them. Gazing out the window, I was sure that cryptic proceedings were taking place in sequestered corners of this scene, vague observances that were at odds with accepted reality. I also felt there was special cause for me to fret over certain things that were happening in one of the other high rooms of the town, a particular room whose location was nevertheless outside my cognizance. Something told me that what was taking

place there was specifically devised to affect my existence in a profound manner. At the same time I did not feel myself to be of any consequence in this or any other universe. I was nothing more than an unseen speck lost in the convolutions of strange schemes. And it was this very remoteness from the designs of my dream universe, this feeling of fantastic homelessness amid an alien order of being, that was the source of anxieties I had never before experienced. I was no more than an irrelevant parcel of living tissue caught in a place I should not be, threatened with being snared in some great dredging net of doom, an incidental shred of flesh pulled out of its element of light and into an icy blackness. In the dream nothing supported my existence, which I felt at any moment might be horribly altered or simply ended. In the most far-reaching import of the phrase, my life was of *no matter*.

But still I could not keep my attention from straying into that other room, sensing what elaborate plots were evolving there and what they might mean for my existence. I thought I could see indistinct figures occupying that spacious chamber, a place furnished with only a few chairs of odd design and commanding a dizzying view of the starry blackness. The great round moon of the dream created sufficient illumination for the night's purposes, painting the walls of the mysterious room a deep aquatic blue; the stars, unneeded and ornamental, presided as lesser lamps over this gathering and its nocturnal offices.

As I observed this scene—though not "bodily" present, as is the way with dreams—it became my conviction that certain rooms offered a marvelous solitude for such functions or festivities. Their atmosphere, that intangible quality

which exists apart from its composing elements of shape and shade, was of a dreamy cast, a state in which time and space had become deranged. A few moments in these rooms might count as centuries or millennia, and their tiniest niche might encompass a universe. Simultaneously, this atmosphere seemed no different from that of the old rooms, the high and lonely rooms, I had known in waking life, even if *this* room appeared to border on the voids of astronomy and its windows opened onto the infinite outside. Then I began speculating that if the room itself was not one of a unique species, perhaps it was the occupants that had introduced its singular element.

Though each of them was completely draped in a massive cloak, the places in which the material of these garments pushed out and folded inwards as it descended to the floor, along with the unnatural contrivance of the chairs whereupon these creatures were situated, betrayed a peculiarity of formation that held me in a state of both paralyzed terror and spellbound curiosity. What were these beings that their robes should adumbrate such unaccountable configurations? With their tall, angular chairs arranged in a circle, they appeared to be leaning in every direction, like unsettled monoliths. It was as if they were assuming postures that were mysteriously symbolic, locking themselves in patterns hostile to mundane analysis. Above all it was their heads, or at least their topmost segments, that were skewed most radically as they inclined toward one another, nodding in ways heretical to terrestrial anatomy. And it was from this part of their structures that there came forth a soft buzzing noise which seemed to serve them as speech.

But the dream offered another detail which possibly related to the mode of communication among these whispering figures who sat in stagnant moonlight. For projecting out of the bulky sleeves dangling at each figure's side were delicate appendages that appeared to be withered, wilted claws bearing numerous talons that tapered off into drooping tentacles. And all of these stringy digits seemed to be working together with lively and unceasing agitation.

At first sight of these gruesome gestures I felt myself about to awaken, to carry back into the world a sense of terrible enlightenment without sure meaning or possibility of expression in any language except the whispered vows of this eerie sect. But I remained longer in this dream, far longer than was natural. I witnessed further the fidgeting of those shriveled claws, a hyperactive gesticulating which seemed to communicate an intolerable knowledge, some ultimate disclosure concerning the order of things. Such movements suggested an array of repulsive analogies: the spinning legs of spiders, the greedy rubbing of a fly's spindly feelers, the darting tongues of snakes. But my cumulative sensation in the dream was only partially involved with what I would call the *triumph of the grotesque*. This sensation —in keeping with the style of certain dreams—was complicated and exact, allowing no ambiguities or confusions to comfort the dreamer. And what was imparted to my witnessing mind was the vision of a world in a trance—a hypnotized parade of beings sleepwalking to the odious manipulations of their whispering masters, those hooded freaks *who were themselves among the hypnotized*. For there was a power superseding theirs, a power which they served and from which they merely emanated, something which was beyond the

universal hypnosis by virtue of its very mindlessness, its awesome idiocy. These cloaked masters, in turn, partook in some measure of godhood, passively presiding as enlightened zombies over the multitudes of the entranced, that frenetic domain of the human.

And it was at this place in my dream that I came to believe that there obtained a terrible intimacy between myself and those whispering effigies of chaos whose existence I dreaded for its very remoteness from mine. Had these beings, for some grim purpose comprehensible only to themselves, allowed me to intrude upon their infernal wisdom? Or was my access to such putrid arcana merely the outcome of some fluke in the universe of atoms, a chance intersection among the demonic elements of which all creation is composed? But the truth was notwithstanding in the face of these insanities; whether by calculation or accident, I was the victim of the unknown. And I succumbed to an ecstatic horror at this insight.

On waking, it seemed that I had carried back with me a tiny, jewel-like particle of this horrific ecstasy, and, by some alchemy of association, this darkly crystalline substance infused its magic into my image of the old town.

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Though I formerly believed myself to be the consummate knower of the town's secrets, the following day was one of unforeseen discovery. The streets that I looked upon that motionless morning were filled with new secrets and seemed to lead me to the very essence of the extraordinary. A previously unknown element appeared to have emerged in the composition of the town, one that must have been hidden

within its most obscure quarters. I mean to say that while these quaint, archaic façades still put on all the appearance of a dreamlike repose, there presently existed, in my sight, evil stirrings beneath this surface. The town had more wonders than I knew, a cache of unwonted offerings stored out of sight. Yet somehow this formula of deception, of corruption in disguise, served to intensify the town's most attractive aspects: a wealth of unsuspected sensations was now provoked by a few slanting rooftops, a low doorway, or a narrow backstreet. And the mist spreading evenly through the town early that morning was luminous with dreams.

The whole day I wandered in a fevered exaltation throughout the old town, seeing it as if for the first time. I scarcely stopped a moment to rest, and I am sure I did not pause to eat. By late afternoon I might also have been suffering from a strain on my nerves, for I had spent many hours nurturing a rare state of mind in which the purest euphoria was invaded and enriched by currents of fear. Each time I rounded a streetcorner or turned my head to catch some beckoning sight, dark tremors were inspired by the hybrid spectacle I witnessed—splendid scenes broken with malign shadows, the lurid and the lovely forever lost in each other's embrace. And when I passed under the arch of an old street and gazed up at the towering structure before me, I was nearly overwhelmed.

My recognition of the place was immediate, though I had never viewed it from my present perspective. Suddenly it seemed I was no longer outside in the street and staring upwards, but was looking down from the room just beneath that peaked roof. It was the highest room on the street, and no window from any of the other houses could see into it.

The building itself, like some of those surrounding it, seemed to be empty, perhaps abandoned. I assessed several ways by which I could force entry, but none of these methods was needed: the front door, contrary to my initial observation, was slightly ajar.

The place was indeed abandoned, stripped of wall-hangings and fixtures, its desolate, tunnel-like hallways visible only in the sickly light that shone through unwashed, curtainless windows. Identical windows also appeared on the landing of each section of the staircase that climbed up through the central part of the edifice like a crooked spine. I stood in a near cataleptic awe of the world I had wandered into, this decayed paradise. It was a venue of strange atmospherics of infinite melancholy and unease, the everlasting residue of some cosmic misfortune. I ascended the stairs of the building with a solemn, mechanical intentness, stopping only when I had reached the top and found the door to a certain room.

And even at the time, I asked myself: could I have entered this room with such unhesitant resolve if I truly expected to find something extraordinary within it? Was it ever my intention to confront the madness of the universe, or at least my own? I had to confess that though I had accepted the benefits of my dreams and fancies, I did not profoundly believe in them. At the deepest level I was their doubter, a thorough skeptic who had indulged a too-free imagination, and perhaps a self-made lunatic.

To all appearances the room was unoccupied. I noted this fact without the disappointment born of real expectancy, but also with a strange relief. Then, as my eyes adjusted to the artificial twilight of the room, I saw the circle of chairs.

They were as strange as I had dreamed, more closely resembling devices of torture than any type of practical or decorative object. Their tall backs were slightly bowed and covered with a coarse hide unlike anything I had ever beheld; their arms were like blades and each had four semicircular grooves cut into them that were spaced evenly across their length; and below were six jointed legs jutting outwards, a feature which transformed each piece into some crablike thing with the apparent ability to scuttle across the floor. If, for a stunned moment, I felt the idiotic desire to install myself in one of these bizarre thrones, this impulse was extinguished upon my observing that the seat of each chair, which at first appeared to be composed of a smooth and solid cube of black glass, was in fact only an open cubicle filled with a murky liquid which quivered strangely when I passed my hand over its surface. As I did this I could feel my entire arm tingle in a way which sent me stumbling backward to the door of that horrible room and which made me loathe every atom of flesh gripping the bones of that limb.

I turned around to exit but was stopped by a figure standing in the doorway. Though I had previously met the man, he now seemed to be someone quite different, someone openly sinister rather than merely enigmatic. When he had disturbed me the day before, I could not have suspected his alliances. His manner had been idiosyncratic but very polite, and he had offered no reason to question his sanity. Now he appeared to be no more that a malignant puppet of madness. From the twisted stance he assumed in the doorway to the vicious and imbecilic expression that possessed the features of his face, he was a thing of strange degeneracy. Before I could back away from him, he took my trembling hand.

“Thank you for coming to visit,” he said in a voice that was a parody of his former politeness. He pulled me close to him; his eyelids lowered and his mouth widely grinned, as if he were enjoying a pleasant breeze on a warm day.

Then he said to me: “They want you with them on their return. They want their chosen ones.”

Nothing can describe what I felt on hearing these words which could only have meaning in a nightmare. Their implications were a quintessence of hellish delirium, and at that instant all the world's wonder suddenly turned to dread. I tried to free myself from the madman's grasp, shouting at him to let go of my hand. “*Your* hand?” he shouted back at me. Then he began to repeat the phrase over and over, laughing as if some sardonic joke had reached a conclusion within the depths of his lunacy. In his foul merriment he weakened, and I escaped. As I rapidly descended the many stairs of the old building, his laughter pursued me as hollow reverberations that echoed far beyond the shadowy spaces of that place.

And that freakish, echoing laughter remained with me as I wandered dazed in darkness, trying to flee my own thoughts and sensations. Gradually the terrible sounds that filled my brain subsided, but they were soon replaced by a new terror—the whispering of strangers whom I passed on the streets of the old town. And no matter how low they spoke or how quickly they silenced one another with embarrassed throat-clearings or reproving looks, their words reached my ears in fragments that I was able to reconstruct because of their frequent repetition. The most common terms were *deformity* and *disfigurement*. If I had not been so distraught I might have approached these persons with a

semblance of civility, cleared my own throat, and said, “I beg your pardon, but I could not help overhearing… And what exactly did you mean, if I may ask, when you said…” But I discovered for myself what those words meant—*how terrible, poor man*—when I returned to my room and stood before the mirror on the wall, holding my head in balance with a supporting hand on either side.

For only one of those hands was mine.

The other belonged to them.

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Life is a nightmare that leaves its mark upon you in order to prove that it is, in fact, real. And to suffer a solitary madness seems the joy of paradise when compared to the extraordinary condition in which one's own madness merely emulates that of the world. I have been lured away by dreams; all is nonsense now.

Let me write, while I still am able, that the transformation has not limited itself. I now find it difficult to continue this manuscript with either hand. These twitching tentacles are not suited for writing in a human manner, and I am losing the will to push my pen across this page. While I have put myself at a great distance from the old town, its influence is undiminished. In these matters there is a terrifying freedom from the recognized laws of space and time. New laws of entity have come to their work as I look helplessly on.

In the interest of others, I have taken precautions to conceal my identity and the precise location of a horror which cannot be helped. Yet I have also taken pains to reveal, as if with malicious intent, the existence and nature of those

same horrors. Be that as it may, neither my motives nor my actions matter in the least. They are both well known to the things that whisper in the highest room of an old town. They know what I write and why I am writing it. Perhaps they are even guiding my pen by means of a hand that is an extension of their own. And if I ever wished to see what lay beneath those dark robes, I will soon be able to satisfy this curiosity with only a glance in my mirror.

I must return to the old town, for now my home can be nowhere else. But my manner of passage to that place cannot be the same, and when I enter again that world of dreams it will be by way of a threshold which no human being has ever crossed… nor ever shall.

The Sect Of The Idiot (1989 Songs Of A Dead Dreamer Version)

First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu #56*, 1988

> The primal chaos, Lord of all... the blind idiot god—Azathoth.
>
> —*Necronomicon*

The extraordinary is a province of the solitary soul. Lost the very moment the crowd comes into view, it remains within the great hollows of dreams, an infinitely secluded place that prepares itself for your arrival, and for mine. Extraordinary joy, extraordinary pain—the fearful poles of a world that both menaces and surpasses this one. It is a miraculous hell toward which one unknowingly wanders. And its gate, in my case, was an old town I had desired to see with all the ardor of a holy madness.

Soon after arriving in the town—whose identity I must allow to remain secret, along with my own—I was settled in a high room overlooking a land of dreams through diamond panes. How many times had I already lingered in idleness before these windows, or ones very much like them, and

gazed deeply into the old town? How often had I wandered its streets, becoming enveloped in its visions?

I discovered an infinite stillness on foggy mornings, miracles of silence on indolent afternoons, and the strangely flickering tableau of never-ending nights. A sense of serene enclosure was conveyed by every aspect of the old town. There were balconies, railed porches, and the jutting upper stories of shops and houses which created intermittent ceilings over sidewalks. Colossal roofs overhung entire streets and transformed them into the corridors of a single structure containing an uncanny multitude of rooms. And these fantastic brims were echoed below by the lesser roofs which drooped above windows like half-closed eyelids and turned each narrow doorway into a magician's cabinet harboring a false depth of solid shadow.

It is difficult to explain, then, how the old town also conveyed a sense of endlessness, of proliferately unseen dimensions, at the same time that it served as the very image of a claustrophobe's nightmare. Even the infinite nights above the great roofs of the town seemed merely the uppermost level of an earthbound estate, at most a musty old attic in which the stars were useless heirlooms and the moon a dusty trunk of dreams. And this paradox was precisely the source of the town's enchantment. I imagined the heavens themselves as part of an essentially interior décor. By day: heaps of clouds like dust balls floating across the empty rooms of the sky. By night: a single sharp tooth of moon painted upon a great black wall. How much I wanted to move into these rooms and live forever in this domain of medieval autumns and mute winters, serving out my sentence

of life among all the visible and invisible wonders I had only dreamed about from so far away.

But no existence, however remote, is without its trials and traps.

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After staying several days in the old town, it is possible that I had been made acutely sensitive by the solitude of the place and by the solitary manner of my life. Late one afternoon I was relaxing in an ancient chair beside those kaleidoscopic windows, when there was a knock at the door. It was only the faintest of knocks, but so unexpected was this elementary event, and so developed was my sensitivity, that it seemed like some unwonted upheaval of atmospheric forces, a kind of cataclysm of empty space, an earthquake in the invisible. Hesitantly I walked across the room and stood before the door, which was only a simple brown slab without molding around its frame. I opened it.

“Oh,” said the little man waiting in the hallway outside. He had neatly groomed silver hair and strikingly clear eyes, two black circles of astonishing alertness. “This is embarrassing. I must have been given the wrong address. The handwriting on this note is such chaos,” he said, looking at the crumpled piece of paper in his hand. “Ha! Never mind, I'll go back and check.”

However, the man did not immediately leave the scene of his embarrassment; instead, he pushed himself upwards on the points of his tiny shoes and stared over my shoulder into my room. His entire body, compact as it was in stature, seemed to be in a state of concentrated excitement. Finally

he said, “Beautiful view from your room,” and he smiled a very tight little smile.

“Yes, it is,” I replied, glancing back into the room and not really knowing what to think. When I turned around the man was gone.

For a few startled moments I did not move. Then I stepped into the hallway and gazed up and down its dim length. It was not very wide, nor did it extend a great distance before turning a windowless corner in either direction. All the doors to the other rooms were closed, and not the slightest noise emerged from any of them. At last I heard what sounded like footsteps descending flights of stairs on the floors below, faintly echoing through the silence, speaking the quiet language of old rooming houses. I felt relieved and returned to my room. The remainder of the day was uneventful and entirely peaceful.

That night, however, I experienced a very strange dream, the culmination, I thought afterwards, of both my lifetime of dreaming and of the recent influence of my sojourn in the old town. Certainly my view of the town was thereafter dramatically transformed. And yet, despite the nature of the dream, this change was not immediately for the worse.

In the dream I occupied a very small dark room, a high room whose windows looked out on a maze of streets which unraveled beneath an abyss of stars. But although the stars were spread across a great reaching blackness, the streets below were bathed in a stale gray dimness which suggested neither night nor day nor any natural phase between them. Gazing out the window, I felt that unseen things were taking place in obscure corners of this scene, none of them having any kind of reality to them, all of them vague and carried

out in a state of sluggish inertia. There seemed to be some particular cause for me to worry about certain things that were happening in one of the other rooms of the town, a very particular room whose location was entirely unknown to me. I had the idea that a peculiar correspondence existed between the activities in that room and my own life, but at the same time I felt infinitely removed from them: What transpired in this other room in no sense concerned my personal fate, yet somehow would profoundly affect it. I seemed to be an unseen speck lost in a convoluted festival of strange schemes. And it was this very remoteness from the designs of my dream universe, this feeling of fantastic homelessness amid a vast alien pattern, that was the source of unnameable and possibly limitless terrors. I was no more than an irrelevant parcel of living tissue caught in a place I should not be, threatened with being snared in some great dredging net of doom, an incidental shred of flesh pulled out of its element of light and into an icy blackness. In the dream nothing supported my existence, which I felt at any moment might be horribly altered or simply... ended. In the profoundest meaning of the expression, my life was of *no matter*.

But still I could not keep my attention from straying into that other room, sensing what elaborate plots were evolving there. I thought I could see indistinct figures occupying that spacious chamber, a place furnished with only a few chairs of extremely odd design and commanding a dizzying view of the starry blackness. The great round moon of the dream created sufficient illumination for the night's purposes, painting the bare walls of the mysterious room a deep aquatic blue; the stars, unneeded and ornamental, presided as lesser lamps over this gathering and its nocturnal offices.

As I observed this scene—though not "bodily" present, as is the way with dreams—it became my conviction that certain rooms offered a marvelous solitude for such functions or festivities. Their atmosphere, that intangible quality which exists apart from its composing elements of shape and shade, was the dreamy aether of remote antiquity, as if an entirely separate stream of time flowed through these places, where a few moments might count as centuries or millennia. Nevertheless, at the *exact* same time this atmosphere was no different from any of the old rooms, the high and lonely rooms, I had known in waking life, even if *this* room seemed to border on the voids of space and its windows opened onto the infinite outside. And I found myself speculating that, if this room itself was not one of a unique species, perhaps it was the occupants that had introduced the singular element.

Although each of them was draped from head downward in a massive cloak, the manner in which this material descended in strange foldings to the floor, and the unusual structure of the chairs in which these creatures were seated, betrayed an oddness that inspired my curiosity and terror. *What might these robes reveal*? I could not help wondering. Who were these beings, so unnaturally shaped? Their tall, angular chairs arranged in a circle, they appeared to be leaning in every direction, like unsettled monoliths. It was as if they were assuming postures that were mysteriously symbolic, locking themselves in patterns hostile to the analysis of mundane order. In like fashion, their heads inclined in peculiar relationship to the rest of their lofty forms, nodding in ways heretical to terrestrial anatomy. And with their unseen faces they whispered almost incessantly, for I can think of no more precise word to describe the soft buzzing

which seemed to serve them as speech. Or was it the suspension of this sound that conveyed their unknown message to one another, those infrequent but remarkable silences which terrified me far more than the alien murmur?

But the dream offered another detail which possibly related to the mode of communication among these whispering figures who sat in stagnant moonlight. For projecting out of the bulky sleeves dangling from each figure's robe were thin and delicate appendages that appeared to have withered away, wilted claws bearing numerous talons that tapered off into drooping tentacles. And all of these stringy digits seemed to be working together with lively and unceasing agitation.

At first sight of these gruesome gestures I felt myself about to awaken, to carry back into the world a sense of terrible enlightenment without sure meaning or possibility of expression in any language except the whispered vows of this eerie sect. But I remained longer in this dream, far longer than was natural. I witnessed the insect-like nervousness of those shriveled mandibles, the brittle excitement of these members which seemed to be revealing an intolerable knowledge, some ultimate disclosure concerning the order of things. Such movements suggested an array of hideous analogies: the spinning legs of spiders, the greedy rubbing of a fly's spindly feelers, the rippling of a lizard's tongue or the twitching of its tail. But my cumulative sensation in the dream was only partially involved with what I would call the *triumph of the grotesque*; for much greater was a quite different perception, one accompanied by a bizarre elation tainted with nausea. This revelation—in keeping with the style of certain dreams—was complicated and exact, allowing no

ambiguities or confusions to comfort the dreamer. And what was imparted to my witnessing mind was the vision of a world in a trance, a hypnotized parade of beings sleepwalking to the odious manipulations of their whispering masters, those hooded freaks *who were themselves among the hypnotized*. For there was a power superseding theirs, a power which they served and from which they merely emanated, some thing which was beyond the universal hypnosis by virtue of its very mindlessness, its awesome idiocy. These cloaked masters, in turn, partook in some measure of godhead, passively presiding as enlightened zombies over the multitudes of the entranced, that frenetic domain of the human sphere.

And it was at this place in my dream that I came to believe that there obtained a terrible intimacy between myself and those whispering effigies of chaos whose existence I dreaded for its very remoteness from mine. Had these beings, for some grim purpose comprehensible only to themselves, allowed me to intrude upon their infernal wisdom? Or was my unwanted access to such putrid arcana merely the outcome of some loathsome fluke in the universe of atoms, a chance intersection among the demonic elements of which all creation is composed? But the truth was notwithstanding in the face of these insanities; whether by calculation or accident, I was the chosen victim of the unknown. And I finally succumbed to an ecstatic horror at this hideous insight.

On waking, it seemed that I had carried back with me a tiny, jewel-like particle of this horrific ecstasy, and, by some alchemy of association, this darkly crystalline substance infused its magic into my image of the old town.

*

Although I formerly believed myself to be the consummate knower of the town's secrets, the day which followed my dream was one of unforeseen discovery. The streets that I looked upon that motionless morning were filled with new secrets and seemed to lead into the very essence of the extraordinary. And a previously unknown element appeared to have emerged in the composition of the town, one that must have been hidden within its most obscure quarters. I mean to say that, while these quaint, archaic façades still put on all the appearance of a dreamlike repose, there now existed, in my sight, evil stirrings beneath this surface. The town had more wonders than I had dreamed, a secreted cache of shadowy offerings. And somehow this undercurrent of deception, of corruption in disguise, served to intensify the town's most attractive aspects: A wealth of unsuspected sensations was now provoked by a few slanting rooftops, a low doorway, or a narrow backstreet. The mist spreading evenly through the town early that morning was luminous with dreams.

The whole day I wandered in a fevered exaltation throughout the old town, seeing it as if for the first time. I scarcely think that I stopped a moment to rest, and I am sure that I did not pause to eat. By late afternoon I might also have been suffering from a strain on my nerves, for I had spent the day nurturing a strange state of mind in which the purest euphoria was invaded and enriched by horrible, formless shadows of fear. Each time I rounded a street corner or turned my head to catch some beckoning sight, the darkest tremors were inspired by the hybrid spectacle I wit-

nessed—splendid scenes broken with malign shadows, the lurid and the lovely forever lost in each other's embrace. And when I passed under the arch of an old street and gazed up at the towering structure before me, I was nearly overwhelmed.

My recognition of the place was immediate, though I had never viewed it from my present perspective. Suddenly I felt myself standing not outside in the street staring upwards, but looking down from the high room beneath that peaked roof. It was the highest room on the street, and no window from any of the other houses could see into it. The building itself, like some of those surrounding it, seemed to be empty, perhaps abandoned. I contemplated several ways by which I could force entry, but none of these methods was needed: The front door, contrary to my initial observation, was slightly ajar.

The place was indeed abandoned, stripped of its furnishings and fixtures, its desolate, tunnel-like hallways visible only in the sickly light which shone through unwashed, curtainless windows. Identical windows also appeared on the landing of each section of the staircase that climbed up through the central part of the house like a crooked spine. I stood in a near cataleptic awe of the world I had wandered into, this decayed paradise. It was a place of strange atmospheres of infinite melancholy and dread, the everlasting residue of some cosmic misfortune. I ascended the stairs with a solemn, mechanical intentness, stopping only when I had reached the top and found the door to a certain room.

And even at the time, I asked myself: Could I have entered this room with such unhesitant resolve if I truly expected to find something extraordinary within it? Was it

ever my intention to confront the madness of the universe, or at least my own? I had to confess that although I had accepted the benefits of my dreams and fancies, I did not profoundly believe in them. At the deepest level I was their doubter, a thorough skeptic who had indulged a too-free imagination, and perhaps a self-made lunatic.

To all appearances the room was unoccupied. I noted this fact without the disappointment born of real expectancy, and also with a strange relief. Then, as my eyes adjusted to the confusing twilight of the room, I saw the circle of chairs.

They were as strange as I had dreamed, more closely resembling devices of torture than any type of practical or decorative object. Their tall backs were slightly bowed and covered with a coarse hide unlike anything I had ever beheld; the arms were like blades and each had four semicircular grooves cut into it that were spaced evenly across its length; and below were six jointed legs jutting outwards, a feature which transformed the entire piece into some crablike thing with the apparent ability, as well as the sinister motive, for movement. If, for a stunned moment, I felt the idiotic impulse to install myself in one of these bizarre thrones of pain, I quickly extinguished this desire upon observing that the seat of each chair, which at first appeared to be composed of a smooth and solid cube of black glass, was in fact only an open cubicle filled with a murky liquid which quivered strangely when I passed my hand over its surface. And as I did this I could feel my entire arm tingle in a way which sent me stumbling backwards toward the door of that horrible room and which made me loathe every atom of the flesh which gripped the bones of that limb. I turned around to exit but was stopped by a figure standing in the doorway.

Although I had previously met the man, he now seemed to be someone quite different, someone openly sinister rather than merely enigmatic. When he had disturbed me the day before I could not have suspected his alliances: His manner had been vaguely unusual but very polite, and he had offered no reason to question his sanity. Now he appeared to be no more than a malignant puppet of madness. From the menacing, twisted stance he assumed in the doorway to the vicious and imbecilic expression that possessed the features of his face, he was a thing of strange degeneracy. Before I could back away from him, he took my trembling arm. “Thank you for coming to visit,” he said in a voice that was a parody of his former politeness. He pulled me close to him; his eyelids lowered and his mouth widely grinned, as if he were enjoying a pleasant breeze on a warm day. And then he said, “They want you with them on their return. They want their chosen ones.”

Nothing can describe what I felt on hearing those words which could only have meaning in a nightmare. Their implications were a quintessence of hellish delirium, and at that instant all the world's wonder turned suddenly to dread. I tried to free myself from the madman's grasp, shouting at him to let go of my hand. “Your hand?” he shouted back at me. Then he began to repeat the phrase over and over, laughing as if some sardonic joke had reached a conclusion within the depths of his lunacy. In his foul merriment he weakened, and I escaped. As I rapidly descended the many stairs of the old building, his laughter pursued me as hollow reverberations which filled the shadowy edifice.

And that freakish, echoing laughter remained with me as I wandered dazed in darkness, trying to flee my own

thoughts and sensations. Gradually the terrible sounds that filled my brain subsided, but they were now replaced by a new terror—the whispering of strangers whom I passed on the nocturnal streets of the old town. And no matter how low they spoke or how quickly they silenced one another with embarrassed throat-clearings and stern looks, their words reached my ears in fragments which I was able to reconstruct because of their frequent repetition. The most common ones were *deformity*, *horrible*, *and disfigurement*. If I had not been so distraught I might have approached these speakers with a semblance of politeness, cleared my own throat, and said, "I beg your pardon, but I could not help overhearing... And what exactly did you mean, if I may ask, when you said..." But I discovered for myself what those words meant—*an unfortunate accident*, *poor man*—when I returned to my room and stood before the mirror on the wall, holding my head in balance with a hand on either side.

For only one of those hands was mine.

The other belonged to them.

*

Life is the nightmare that leaves its mark behind to prove that it was real. And to suffer a solitary madness seems the joy of paradise when compared to the extraordinary condition in which one's own madness is merely an echo from the world outside. I have been lured away by dreams; all is nonsense now.

Let me write, while I still am able, that the transformation has not limited itself. I now find it difficult to continue this manuscript with either hand: These twitching tentacles can barely grasp the pen, and I am losing the will to push a

shriveled paw across this page. While I have put myself at a great distance from the old town, its influence is undiminished. In these matters there is a terrible freedom from the bonds of space and time. But I remain bound by greater forces, strange powers that are at their work as I look helplessly on.

In the interest of others, I have taken precautions to conceal my identity and the precise location of a horror which cannot be helped; yet, I have also taken pains to reveal, as if with malicious intent, the existence and nature of those same horrors. Ultimately, neither my motives nor my actions are of any consequence; they are both well known to the things which whisper in the high room of an old town. They know what I write and why I am writing it. Perhaps they are even guiding my pen by means of a hand that is an extension of their own. And if I ever desired to see what lay beneath those dark robes, I will soon be able to satisfy this curiosity with only a glance in my mirror.

I must return to the old town, for now my home can be nowhere else. But the way there is no longer the same as it was, and when I enter again that world of dreams I will arrive by a threshold which no human has ever crossed… nor ever shall.

Autumnal
(2011 Noctuary Version)

First published in its original form in *Dagon* #22/23, 1988 as '*Autumn Horror*'

When all the landscape is dying, descending fragrantly to earth, we alone rise up. After light and warmth have passed from the world, when everyone stands melancholy at the graveside of nature, we alone return to keep them company. This is our season to be reborn. The supple swish of summer trees has become a dry rattle in a cooling wind, and our ears begin to tingle as we lie deep in our dark beds. Crinkled leaves scratch against our doors, calling us from our lonely houses.

We drift groggily out of the shadows. Comfortably rooted in oblivion, we do not particularly enjoy being pulled up into the burning air for the amusement of some unknown mischief maker, some cosmic prankster, master of the trick. But perhaps we find ourselves nearby an old farm where once abundant fields, neatly rowed, now lie fallow and abandoned by all but a few scraggly stalks. We witness the scene and, with what remains of our mouths, we smile. Beneath a sharp scythe of moon, we now become eager to fulfill ourselves.

We do not hate the living, no more than night hates day; like them, we have been assigned a task which we must execute as best we can. However put out we may feel, we are hopelessly superstitious about shirking certain obligations, for there are some which even the power of a posthumous lethargy cannot refuse.

Thus, on nights when an icy rain is dripping from the eaves, when all barriers of light and luxuriance are down, our images appear to haunt and harrow. Crumpled silhouettes in doorways, crouching heaps in corners, emaciated shapes in cellars and attics—suddenly lit by a flash of lightning! Or perhaps we are illumed by the passing flame of a candle, or the soft blue flush of moonlight. And the screaming begins.

But sometimes there is no shock, no surprise. The unfortunate witnesses of our insane truth were already driven half-witless with dread anticipation. Our horror is an expected one, given the unnatural propensities of the season.

When the world goes gray on its way to white, every living heart summons us with its fear; and, if circumstances are favorable, we will answer. We take as many as we can back to the grave with us, because that is our task. Our senseless cycle is out of nature's season: we go our own way, deviates of matter longing to bring an end to the charade of all seasons, natural or supernatural.

And we are always dreaming of the day when the frenzy of summer dies out evermore, when everyone like a shriveled leaf sinks into the cooling ground of a sunless earth, and when even the colors of autumn have grown dull for the last time, dissolving into the desolate purity of an eternal winter.

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And we are always dreaming of the day when all the fires of summer are defunct, when everyone like a shrivelled leaf sinks into the cooling ground of a sunless earth, and when even the colors of autumn have withered for the last time, dissolving into the desolate whiteness of an eternal winter.

One May Be Dreaming (2011 Noctuary Version)

First published in *Dagon* #22/23, 1988 as 'Oneiric Horror'

Beyond the windows a dense fog spreads across the graveyard, and a few lights beam within hazy depths, glowing like old lamps along an empty street. Night is softly beginning.

Within the window are narrow bars, both vertical and horizontal, which divide it into several smaller windows. The intersections of these bars form crosses. Not far beyond the windowpanes, there are other crosses jutting out of the earth-hugging fog in the graveyard. To all appearances, it is a burial-ground in the clouds that I contemplate through the window.

Upon the window ledge is an old pipe that seems to have been mine in another life. The pipe's dark bowl must have brightened to a reddish-gold as I smoked and gazed beyond the window at the graveyard. When the tobacco had burned to the bottom, perhaps I gently knocked the pipe against the inside wall of the fireplace, showering the logs and stones with warm ashes. The fireplace is framed within the wall perpendicular to the window. Across the room are a large desk and a high-backed chair. The lamp positioned in the far right corner of the desk serves as illumination for the entire room, a modest supplement to those pale beacons beyond the window. Some old books, pens, and writing paper are spread across the top of the desk. In the dim depths of the

room, against the fourth wall, is a towering clock that ticks quietly.

These, then, are the main features of the room in which I find myself: window, fireplace, desk, and clock. There is no door.

I never dreamed that dying in one's sleep would encompass dreaming itself. I often dreamed of this room and now, near the point of death, have become its prisoner. And here my bloodless form is held while my other body somewhere lies still and without hope. There can be no doubt that my present state is without reality. If nothing else, I know what it is like to dream. And although a universe of strange sensation is inspired by those lights beyond the window, by the fog and the graveyard, they are no more real than I am. I know there is nothing beyond those lights and that the obscured ground outside could never sustain my steps. Should I venture there I would fall straight into an absolute darkness, rather than approaching it by the degrees of my dying dreams.

For other dreams came before this one—dreams in which I saw lights more brilliant, a fog even more dense, and gravestones with names I could almost read from the distance of this room. But everything is dimming, dissolving, and growing dark. The next dream will be darker still, everything a little more confused, my thoughts... wandering. And objects that are now part of the scene may soon be missing: perhaps even my pipe—if it was ever mine—will be gone forever.

Those lights flickering in the fog seem the very face of infinity, the spare features of an empty mask. The clock begins to sound within the room and for a moment the silent void has found an echoing voice. Everything is dimming, dissolv-

ing... the next dream will be darker still. And when I awake the room will be darker, dissipating like a fog around me, a black fog in which everything will drown and all my thoughts will be gone forever.

But for the moment I am safe in my dream, this dream. Beyond the window a dense fog spreads across the graveyard, and a few lights beam within hazy depths, glowing like old lamps along an empty street. Night is softly beginning.

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Conversations In A Dead Language (2011 Noctuary Version)

First published in *Deathrealm*, Spring 1989

Conveniens vitae mors fuit ista suae.

—*Ovid*

I

After changing out of his uniform, he went downstairs to search the kitchen drawers, rattling his way through cutlery and cooking utensils. Finally he found what he wanted. A carving knife, a holiday knife, the traditional blade he'd used over the years. Knifey-wifey.

First he carved out an eye, spearing the triangle with the point of his knife and neatly drawing the pulpy thing from its socket. Pinching the blade, he slid his two fingers along the blunt edge, pushing the eye onto the newspaper he'd carefully placed next to the sink. Another eye, a nose, a howling oval mouth. Done. Except for manually scooping out the seedy and stringy entrails and supplanting them with a squat little candle of the vigil type. Guide them, holy lantern, through the darkness and to me. To meezy-weezy.

He dumped several bags of candy into a large potato chip bowl, fingering pieces here and there: the plump caramels, the tarty sourballs, the chocolate kisses for the kids. A few were test-chewed for taste and texture. A few more. Not too many, for some of his co-workers already called him Fatass, almost behind his back. And he would spoil the holiday dinner he had struggled to prepare in the little time left before dark. Tomorrow he'd start his diet and begin making more austere meals for himself.

At dark he brought the pumpkin out to the porch, placing it on a small but lofty table over which he'd draped a bed sheet no longer in normal use. He scanned the old neighborhood. Beyond the railings of other porches and in picture windows up and down the suburban street glowed a race of new faces. Holiday visitors come to stay the night, without a hope of surviving till the next day. All Saints Day. Father Mickiewicz was saying an early morning mass, and he would have just enough time to attend before going to work.

No kids yet. Wait. There we go, bobbing down the street: a scarecrow, a robot, and—what is it?—oh, a white-faced clown. Not the skull-faced thing he'd at first thought it was, pale and hollow-eyed as the moon shining frostily on one of the clearest nights he'd ever seen. The stars were a frozen effervescence.

Better get inside. They'll be coming soon. Waiting behind the glass of the front door with the bowl of candy under his arm, he nervously grabbed up a handful of the sweets and let them fall piece by piece back into the bowl, a buccaneer reveling in his loot... a grizzle-faced pirate, eye-patch over an empty socket, a jolly roger on his cap with “x” marking the spot in bones, running up the front walk, charging up the

wooden stairs of the porch, rubber cutlass stuffed in his pants.

"Trick or treat."

"Well, well, well," he said, his voice rising in pitch with each successive "well." "If it isn't Blackbeard. Or is it Bluebeard? I always forget. But you don't have a beard at all, do you?" The pirate shook his head shyly to say no. "Maybe we should call you Nobeard, then, at least until you start shaving."

"I have a moustache. Trick or treat, mister," the boy said, impatiently holding up an empty pillow case.

"You do have a nice moustache at that. Here you go, then," he said, tossing a handful of candy into the sack. "And cut a few throats for me," he shouted as the boy turned and ran off.

He didn't have to say those last words so loudly. Neighbors. No, no one heard. The streets are filled with shouters tonight, one the same as another. Listen to the voices all over the neighborhood, music against the sounding board of silence and the chill infinity of autumn.

Here come some more. Goody.

Trick or treat: an obese skeleton, meat bulging under its painted-costume bones. How unfortunate, especially at his age. Fatass of the boneyard and the schoolyard. Give him an extra handful of candy. "Thanks a lot, mister." "Here, have more." Then the skeleton waddled down the porch steps, its image thinning out into the nullity of the darkness, candy-filled paper bag rattling away to a whisper.

Trick or treat: an overgrown baby, bibbed and bootied, with a complexion problem erupting on its preadolescent face. "Well, cootchie coo," he said to the infant as he

showered its open bunting with candy. Baby sneered as it toddled off, pouchy diapers slipping down its backside, disappearing once again into the blackness from which it had momentarily emerged.

Trick or treat: midget vampire, couldn't be more than six years old. Wave to Mom waiting on the sidewalk. "*Very* scary. Your parents must be proud. Did you do all that makeup work yourself?" he whispered. The little thing mutely gazed up, its eyes underlidded with kohl-dark smudges. It then used a tiny finger, pointy nail painted black, to indicate the guardian figure near the street. "Mom, huh? Does she like sourballs? Sure she does. Here's some for Mom and some more for yourself, nice red ones to suck on. That's what you scary vampires like, eh?" he finished, winking. Cautiously descending the stairs, the child of the night returned to its parent, and both proceeded to the next house, joining the anonymous ranks of their predecessors.

Others came and went. An extraterrestrial with a runny nose, a smelly pair of ghosts, an asthmatic tube of toothpaste. The parade thickened as the night wore on. The wind picked up and a torn kite struggled to free itself from the clutches of an elm across the street. Above the trees the October sky remained lucid, as if a glossy veneer had been applied across the night. The moon brightened to a teary gleam, while voices below waned. Fewer and fewer disguises perpetrated deception in the neighborhood. These will probably be the last ones coming up the porch. Almost out of candy anyway.

Trick or treat. Trick or treat.

Remarkable, these two. Obviously brother and sister, maybe twins. No, the boy looked older. A winning couple.

“Well, congratulations to the bride and groom,” he said, tossing candy like rice into the bag of the tuxedoed groom. What faces, so clear. Shining stars.

“Hey, you're the mailman,” said the boy.

“Very observant. You're marrying a smart one here,” he said to the girl.

“I saw you were, too,” she replied.

“Course you did. You're sharp kids, both of you. You guys must be tired, walking around all night.” The kids shrugged, unaware of the meaning of fatigue. “I know I'm plenty tired after delivering the mail up and down these streets. And I do that every day, except Sunday of course. Then I go to church. You kids go to church?” It seemed they did; wrong one, though. “You know, at our church we have outings and stuff like that for kids. Hey, I got an idea—”

A car slowed down on the street, its constabulary spotlight scanning between houses on the opposite side. Some missing Halloweeners maybe. “Never mind my idea, kids. Trick or treat,” he said abruptly, lavishing candy on the bride, who held up her gown to keep from falling on the porch steps. Then he turned to the groom, on whom he bestowed the remaining contents of the large bowl. Was the child blushing, or was it just the light from the jack-o-lantern?

“C'mon, Charlie,” his sister called from the sidewalk.

“Happy Halloween, Charlie,” he said, waving. “See you guys around.”

His thoughts drifted off for a moment. When he regained control the kids were gone, all of them. Except for imaginary ones, ideals of their type. Like that boy and his sister.

He left the candle burning in the jack-o-lantern. Let it make the most of its brief life. Tomorrow it would be defunct and placed out with the other refuse, an extinguished shell pressed affectionately against a garbage bag. Tomorrow... All Saints Day. Pick up Mother for church in the morning. Could count it as a weekly visit, holy day of obligation. Also have to remember to talk to Father M. about taking that kiddie group to the football game.

The kids. Their annual performance was now over, the makeup wiped away and all the costumes back in their boxes. He locked the door and switched off the downstairs lights. Then he climbed the steps to his bedroom, almost out of breath when he reached the second floor. After undressing himself, he slid beneath the covers of his bed. Lying on his back, he still heard “trick or treat” and saw their faces in the darkness. And when they tried to dissolve into the background of his sleepy mind... he brought them back.

II

“Ttrrrick or ttrrreat,” chattered a trio of hacking, sniffing hoboes. It was much colder this year, and he was wearing the bluish-gray wool overcoat he delivered the mail in. “Some for you, you, and you,” he said in a merely efficient tone of voice. The bums were not overly grateful for the handouts. They don't appreciate anything the way they used to. Things change so fast. Forget it, close the door, icy blasts.

Weeks ago the elms and red maples in the neighborhood had been assaulted by an unseasonable frigidity and were stripped of their leaves. Clouds now clotted up the sky, a murky purple ceiling through which no star shone. Snow was imminent.

Fewer kids observed the holiday this year, and of the ones who did a good number of them evidently took little pride in the imagination or lavishness of their disguises. Many were content to rub a little burnt cork on their faces and go out begging in their everyday clothes.

Nothing seemed the same, not since the unexpected death of his mother. Strange how you can suffer the loss of something that you cherished so little in the first place. A dwarfish, cranky old woman dies, and her absence becomes palpable. His loneliness was now complete. It was the difference between a night with a single fibrillating star and one without anything but smothering darkness.

But remember those times when she used to... No, *nihil nisi bonum*. Let the dead, et cetera, et cetera. Father M. had conducted an excellent service, and there was little point in ruining that perfect sense of finality the priest had managed to convey regarding the earthly phase of his mother's existence. So why bring her now into his thoughts?

There were no longer any children roaming the streets of the neighborhood. All gone home. Bye-bye. Might as well close up till next year, he thought. No, wait.

Here they are again, coming late in the evening as they did last year. Take off the coat, a sudden flash of warmth. The warming stars had returned, shining their true light once more. How they beamed, those two little points in the blackness. Their stellar intensity went right into him, a bright tightness. He was now grateful for the predominant gloom of this year's Halloween, which only exacerbated his present state of delight. That they were wearing the same costumes as last year was more than he could have hoped.

“Trick or treat,” they said from afar, repeating the invocation when the man standing behind the glass door didn't respond and merely stood staring at them. Then he opened the door wide.

“Hello, happy couple. Nice to see you again. You remember me, the mailman?”

The children exchanged glances, and the boy said: “Yeah, sure.” The girl antiphonied with a giggle, enhancing his delight in the situation.

“Well, here we are one year later and you two are still dressed and waiting for the wedding to start. Or did it just get over with? At this rate you won't make any progress at all. What about next year? And the next? You'll never get any older, know what I mean? Nothing'll change. Is that okay with you?”

The children tried for comprehending nods but only achieved movements and facial expressions of polite bewilderment.

“Well, it's okay with me too. Confidentially, I wish things had stopped changing for me a long time ago. Anyway, how about some candy?”

The candy was proffered, the children saying “thaaank yooou” in the same way they said it at dozens of other houses. But just before they were allowed to continue on their way… he demanded their attention once more.

“Hey, I think I saw you two playing outside your house one day when I came by with the mail. It's that big white house over on Pine Court, isn't it?”

“Nope,” said the boy. His sister had impatiently made it to the sidewalk already. “It's red with black shutters. On Ash.” Without waiting for a reaction to his answer he joined his

sister, and side by side the bride and groom walked far down the street, for there didn't seem to be any other houses open for business nearby. He watched them become tiny in the distance and eventually disappear into the dark.

Cold out here, shut the door. There was nothing more to see; he had successfully photographed the encounter for the family album of his imagination. If anything, their faces glowed even brighter and clearer this year. Perhaps they really hadn't changed and never would. No, he thought in the darkness of his bedroom. Everything changes and always for the worst. But they wouldn't make any sudden transformations now, not in his thoughts. Again and again he brought them back to make sure they were the same.

He set his alarm clock to wake himself for early mass the next day. There was no one who would be accompanying him to church this year. For the first time he'd be going alone.

Alone.

III

Next Halloween there was a premature appearance of snow, a thin foundation of whiteness that clung to the earth and trees, putting a pallid face on the suburb. In the moonlight it glittered, a frosty spume. This sparkling below was mirrored by the stars positioned tenuously in the night above. A monstrous mass of snow clouds to the west threatened to intervene, cutting off the reflection from its source and turning everything into a dull emptiness. All sounds were hollowed by the cold, made into the cries of migrating birds in a vacant November dusk.

Not *even* N*ovember yet and* l*ook at it*, he thought as he stared through the glass of his front door. Very few were out tonight, and the ones who were found fewer houses open to them, closed doors and extinguished porch lights turning them away to roam blindly through the streets. He had lost much of the spirit himself and had not even set out a jack-o-lantern to signal his harbor in the night.

Then again, how would he have carried around such a weighty object with his leg the way it was now? One good fall down the stairs and he started collecting disability pay from the government, laid up for months in the solitude of his home.

He had prayed for punishment and his prayers had been answered. Not the leg itself, which only offered physical pain and inconvenience, but the other punishment—the solitude. This was one of the many ways he remembered being corrected as a child. His mother would lock him in a small room in the basement. How could she do that? How could she exile her only child to a cold stone prison without the relief of illumination, save for that which hazed in through a dusty window-well. So he stood as near as he could to the light. It was there that he once saw a fly twitching in a spider web. He watched and watched and eventually the spider came out to begin feasting on its prey. He watched it all, dazed with horror. When it was over he wanted to do something. He did. With a predatory stealth he managed to pinch up the little spider and pull it off its web. It tasted like nothing at all really, except a momentary tickle on his dry tongue.

"Trick or treat," he heard. And he almost got up to arduously cane his way to the door. But the Halloween slogan

had been spoken somewhere in the distance. Why did it sound so close for a moment? Crescendoing echoes of the imagination, where far is near, up is down, and pain is pleasure. Maybe he should close up for the night. There seemed to be only a few kids playing the game this year. Only the most desultory stragglers remained at this point. Well, there was one now.

"Trick or treat," said a mild, failing little voice. Standing on the other side of the door was an elaborately garbed witch, complete with a warm black shawl and black gloves in addition to her black gown. An old broom was held in one hand, a bag in the other.

"You'll have to wait just a moment," he called through the door as he struggled to get up from the sofa with the aid of his cane. Pain. Good, good. He picked up a full bag of candy from the coffee table and was quite prepared to bestow its entire contents on the little lady in black. But then he recognized who it was behind the cadaver-yellow makeup. Watch it. Wouldn't want to do anything unusual. Play you don't know who it is. And do not say anything concerning red houses with black shutters. Nothing about Ash Street.

To make matters worse, there was the outline of a parent standing on the sidewalk. Insure the safety of the last living child, he thought. But maybe there were others, though he'd only seen the brother and sister. Careful. Pretend she's unfamiliar; after all, she's wearing a different get-up from the one she wore the past two years. Above all don't say a word about you know who.

And what if he should innocently ask where was her little brother this year? Would she say: "He was killed," or maybe, "He's dead," or perhaps just, "He's gone," depending on how

the parents handled the whole affair. With any luck, he would not have to find out.

He opened the door just far enough to hand out the candy and in a bland voice said: “Here you go, my little witch.” That last part just slipped out somehow.

“Thank you,” she said under her breath, under a thousand breaths of fear and mournful experience. They had both lost someone not so long ago.

She turned away, and as she descended the porch steps her broom clunked along one step behind her. An old, frayed, throwaway broom. Perfect for witches. And the kind perfect for keeping a child in line. An ugly old thing kept in a corner, an instrument of discipline always within easy reach, always within a child's sight until the thing became a dream-haunting image. His mother's broom.

After the girl and her mother were out of sight, he closed the door on the world and, having survived a tense episode, was actually grateful for the solitude that only minutes ago was the object of his dread.

Darkness. Bed.

But he could not sleep, not to say he did not dream. Hypnagogic horrors settled into his mind, a grotesque succession of images resembling lurid frames from old comic strips. Impossibly distorted faces painted in garish colors frolicked before his psychic vision, all entirely beyond his control. These were accompanied by a series of funhouse noises which seemed to emanate from some zone located between his brain and the moonlit bedroom around him. A drone of half-thrilled, half-horrified voices filled the background of his imagination, punctuated by super-distinct shouts which used his name as an excuse for sound. It was an abstract ver-

sion of his mother's voice, now robbed of any sensual quality to identify it as such, remaining only a pure idea. The voice called out his name from a distant room in his memory. *Sam-u-el*, it shouted with a terrible urgency of obscure origin. Then suddenly—*trick or treat*. The words echoed, changing in sense as they faded into silence: *trick or treat—down the street—we will meet—ashes, ashes*. No, not ashes but other trees. The boy walked behind some big maples, was eclipsed by them. Did he know a car was following him that night? Don't lose him now. Don't lose him. Ah, there he was on the other side. Nice trees. Good old trees. The boy turned around, and in his hand was a tangled web of strings whose ends extended up to the stars which he began working like kites or toy airplanes or flying puppets, staring up at the night and screaming for the help that never came. Mother's voice started shouting again; then, the other voices mixed in, becoming a foul babbling unity of dead voices chattering away. All the dead conversed with him in a single voicey-woicey.

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But this didn't sound as if it were part of his delirium. The words seemed to originate from outside him, for their utterance served to disturb his half-sleep and free him of its terrible weight. Instinctively cautious of his lame leg, he managed to wrest himself from the sweaty bedcovers and place both feet on the solid floor. This felt reassuring. But then:

Trick or treat.

It was outside. Someone on the front porch. “I'm coming,” he called into the darkness, the sound of his own voice

awakening him to the absurdity of what it had said. Had the months of solitude finally exacted their strange price from his sanity? Listen closely. Maybe it won't happen again.

Trick or treat. Trick or treat.

Trick, he thought. But he'd have to go downstairs to be sure. He imagined seeing a playfully laughing shape or shapes scurrying off into the darkness the moment he opened the door. He'd have to hurry, though, if he was to catch them at it. Damn leg, where's that cane. He next found his bathrobe in the darkness and draped it over himself. Now to negotiate those wicked stairs. Turn on the hallway light. No, that would alert them to his coming. Smart.

He was making it down the stairs in good time, considering the gloomy conditions he was working under. Neither this nor that nor gloom of night. Gloom of night. Dead of night. Night of the Dead.

With that odd sprightliness of cripples he ambled his way down the stairs, his cane always remaining a step ahead for support. Concentrate, he told his mind, which was starting to wander into strange places in the darkness. Watch out! Almost took a tumble that time. Finally he made it to the very bottom. A sound came through the wall from out on the front porch, a soft explosion it seemed. Good, they were still there. He could catch them and reassure his mind regarding the source of its fancies. The labor of walking down the stairs had left him rather hyperventilated and unsure about everything.

Trying to manage the shortest possible interval between the two operations, he turned the lock above the handle and pulled back the door as quickly as he was able. A cold wind

seeped in around the edges of the outer door, prowling its way past him and into the house. Out on the porch there was no sign of a boyish trickster. Wait, yes there was.

He had to turn on the porch light to see it. Directly in front of the door a jack-o-lantern had been heaved forcefully down onto the cement, caving in its pulpy shell which had exploded into fragments lying here and there on the porch. He opened the outer door for a closer look, and a swift wind invaded the house, flying past his head on frigid wings. What a blast, close the door. Close the door!

“Little buggers,” he said very clearly, an attempt to relieve his sense of disorder and delirium.

“Who, meezy-weezy?” said the voice behind him.

At the top of the stairs. A dwarfish silhouette, seemingly with something in its hand. A weapon, something like a broom. Well, he had his cane at least.

“How did you get in here, child?” he asked without being sure it really was a child, considering its strangely hybrid voice.

“Child yourself, sonny. You wish you had a little companion to keep you warm in the basement.”

“I asked how did you get in?” he repeated, still hoping to establish a rational manner of entry.

“In? I was already in. I'm out there, too, if you want to know.”

“Out where?” he asked.

“Out there with all the ghosts.” The figure was pointing out the window at the top of the stairs, out at the kaleidoscopic sky.

“What do you mean?” he inquired with oneiric inspiration, the normalcy of dream being the only thing that kept

his mind together at this stage.

“Mean? I don't mean nothing, you meany.”

Double negative, he thought, relieved to have retained contact with a real world of grammatical propriety. Double negative: two empty mirrors reflecting each other's emptiness to infinite powers, nothing canceling out nothing.

“You don't mean nothing?” he echoed with an interrogative inflection.

“Yup, that's where you're going.”

“How am I supposed to do that?” he asked, gripping his cane tightly, sensing a climax to this confrontation.

“How? You let the dead worry about that... TRICK OR TREAT!”

And suddenly the thing came gliding down through the darkness.

IV

He was found the next day by Father Mickiewicz, who had telephoned earlier after failing to see this clockwork parishioner appear as usual for early mass on All Saints Day. The door was wide open, and the priest discovered his body at the bottom of the stairs, its bathrobe and underclothes grotesquely disarranged. The poor man seemed to have taken another fall, a fatal one this time. Aimless life, aimless death: *Thus was his death in keeping with his life*, as Ovid wrote. So ran the priest's ad hoc eulogy, though not the one he would deliver at the deceased's funeral.

But why was the door open if he fell down the stairs? Father M. came to ask himself. The police answered this question with theories about an intruder or intruders unknown. Given the nature of the crime, they speculated on a

revenge motive, which the priest's informal testimony was quick to contradict. The idea of revenge against such a man was far-fetched, if not totally meaningless. Yes, meaningless. Nevertheless, the motive was not robbery and the man seemed to have been beaten to death, possibly with his own cane. Later evidence showed that the corpse had been violated, but with an object much longer and coarser than the cane originally supposed. They were now looking for something with the dimensions of a broomstick, probably a very old thing, splintered and decayed. But they would never find it in the places they were searching.

Conversations In A Dead Language (1994 Noctuary Version)

First published in *Deathrealm*, Spring 1989

Conveniens vitae mors fuit ista suae.

—*Ovid*

I

After changing out of his uniform, he went downstairs to search the kitchen drawers, rattling his way through cutlery and cooking utensils. Finally he found what he wanted. A carving knife, a holiday knife, the traditional blade he'd used over the years. Knifey-wifey.

First he carved out an eye, spearing the triangle with the point of his knife and neatly drawing the pulpy thing from its socket. Pinching the blade, he slid his two fingers along the blunt edge, pushing the eye onto the newspaper he'd carefully placed next to the sink. Another eye, a nose, a howling oval mouth. Done. Except for manually scooping out the seedy and stringy entrails and supplanting them with a squat little candle of the vigil type. Guide them, holy lantern, through darkness and disaster. To me. To meezy-weezy.

He dumped several bags of candy into a large potato chip bowl, fingering pieces here and there: the plump caramels, the tarty sour balls, the chocolate kisses for the kids. A few were test-chewed for taste and texture. A few more. Not too many, for some of his co-workers already called him Fatass, almost behind his back. And he would spoil the holiday dinner he had struggled to prepare in the little time left before dark. Tomorrow he'd start his diet and begin making more austere meals for himself.

At dark he brought the pumpkin out to the porch, placing it on a small but lofty table over which he'd draped a bedsheet no longer in normal use. He scanned the old neighborhood. Beyond the railings of other porches and in picture windows up and down the street glowed a race of new faces in the suburb. Holiday visitors come to stay the night, without a hope of surviving till the next day. All Souls Day. Father Mickiewicz was saying an early morning mass, which there would be just enough time to attend before going to work.

No kids yet. Wait. There we go, bobbing down the street: a scarecrow, a robot, and—what is it?—oh, a white-faced clown. Not the skull-faced thing he'd at first thought it was, pale and hollow-eyed as the moon shining frostily on one of the clearest nights he'd ever seen. The stars were a frozen effervescence.

Better get inside. They'll be coming soon. Waiting behind the glass of the front door with the bowl of candy under his arm, he nervously grabbed up palmsful of the sweets and let them fall piece by piece back into the bowl, a buccaneer revelling in his loot... a grizzled-faced pirate, eye-patch over an empty socket, a jolly roger on his cap with “x” marking the

spot in bones, running up the front walk, charging up the wooden stairs of the porch, rubber cutlass stuffed in his pants.

“Trick or treat.”

“Well, well, well,” he said, his voice rising in pitch with each successive “well.” “If it isn't Blackbeard. Or is it Bluebeard, I always forget. But you don't have a beard at all, do you?” The pirate shook his head shyly to say no. “Maybe we should call you Nobeard, then, at least until you start shaving.”

“I have a moustache. Trick or treat, mister,” the boy said, impatiently holding up an empty pillow case.

“You do have a nice moustache at that. Here you go, then,” he said, tossing a handful of candy into the sack. “And cut a few throats for me,” he shouted as the boy turned and ran off.

He didn't have to say those last words so loudly. Neighbors. No, no one heard. The streets are filled with shouters tonight, one the same as another. Listen to the voices all over the neighborhood, music against the sounding board of silence and the chill infinity of autumn.

Here come some more. Goody.

Trick or treat: an obese skeleton, meat bulging under its painted-costume bones. How unfortunate, especially at his age. Fatass of the boneyard and the schoolyard. Give him an extra handful of candy. “Thanks a lot, mister.”

“Here, have more.” Then the skeleton waddled down the porch steps, its image thinning out into the nullity of the darkness, candy-filled paper bag rattling away to a whisper.

Trick or treat: an overgrown baby, bibbed and bootied, with a complexion problem erupting on its pre-adolescent

face. “Well, cootchie coo,” he said to the infant as he showered its open bunting with candy. Baby sneered as it toddled off, pouchy diapers slipping down its backside, disappearing once again into the black from which it had momentarily emerged.

Trick or treat: midget vampire, couldn't be more than six years old. Wave to Mom waiting on the sidewalk. “Very scary. Your parents must be proud. Did you do all that make-up work yourself,” he whispered. The little thing mutely gazed up, its eyes underlidded with kohl-dark smudges. It then used a tiny finger, pointy nail painted black, to indicate the guardian figure near the street. “Mom, huh? Does she like sourballs? Sure she does. Here's some for Mom and some more for yourself, nice red ones to suck on. That's what you scary vampires like, eh?” he finished, winking. Cautiously descending the stairs, the child of the night returned to its parent, and both proceeded to the next house, joining the anonymous ranks of their predecessors.

Others came and went. An extraterrestrial with a runny nose, a smelly pair of ghosts, an asthmatic tube of toothpaste.

The parade thickened as the night wore on. The wind picked up and a torn kite struggled to free itself from the clutches of an elm across the street. Above the trees the October sky remained lucid, as if a glossy veneer had been applied across the night. The moon brightened to a teary gleam, while voices below waned. Fewer and fewer disguises perpetrated deception in the neighborhood. These'll probably be the last ones—coming up the porch. Almost out of candy anyway.

Trick or treat. Trick or treat.

Remarkable, these two. Obviously brother and sister, maybe twins. No, the girl looks older. A winning couple, especially the bride. “Well, congratulations to the gride and broom. I know I said it backwards. That's because you're backwards, aren't you? Whose idea was that?” he asked, tossing candy like rice into the bag of the tuxedoed groom. What faces, so clear. Shining stars.

“Hey, you're the mailman,” said the boy.

“Very observant. You're marrying a smart one here,” he said to the groom.

“I saw you were, too,” she replied.

“Course you did. You're sharp kids, both of you. Hey, you guys must be tired, walking around all night.” The kids shrugged, unaware of the meaning of fatigue. “I know I am after delivering the mail up and down these streets. And I do that every day, except Sunday of course. Then I go to church. You kids go to church?” It seemed they did; wrong one, though. “You know, at our church we have outings and stuff like that for kids. Hey, I got an idea—”

A car slowed down on the street, its constabulary spotlight scanning between houses on the opposite side. Some missing Halloweeners maybe. “Never mind my idea, kids. Trick or treat,” he said abruptly, lavishing candy on the groom, who immediately strode off. Then he turned to the bride, on whom he bestowed the entire remaining contents of the large bowl, conveying a scrupulously neutral expression as he did so. Was the child blushing, or was it just the light from the jack-o-lantern?

“C'mon, Charlie,” his sister called from the sidewalk.

“Happy Halloween, Charlie. See you next year.” Maybe around the neighborhood.

His thoughts drifted off for a moment. When he regained control the kids were gone, all of them. Except for imaginary ones, ideals of their type. Like that boy and his sister.

He left the candle burning in the jack-o-lantern. Let it make the most of its brief life. Tomorrow it would be defunct and placed out with the other refuse, an extinguished shell pressed affectionately against a garbage bag. Tomorrow... All Souls Day. Pick up Mother for church in the morning. Could count it as a weekly visit, holy day of obligation. Also have to remember to talk to Father M. about taking that kiddie group to the football game.

The kids. Their annual performance was now over, the make-up wiped away and all the costumes back in their boxes. After he turned off the lights downstairs and upstairs, and was lying in bed, he still heard "trick or treat" and saw their faces in the darkness. And when they tried to dissolve into the background of his sleepy mind... he brought them back.

II

"Ttrrrick or ttrrreat," chattered a trio of hacking, sniffing hoboes. It was much colder this year, and he was wearing the bluish-gray wool overcoat he delivered the mail in. "Some for you, you, and you," he said in a merely efficient tone of voice. The bums were not overly grateful for the handouts. They don't appreciate anything the way they used to. Things change so fast. Forget it, close the door, icy blasts.

Weeks ago the elms and red maples in the neighborhood had been assaulted by unseasonable frigidity and stripped to the bone. Clouds now clotted up the sky, a murky purple ceiling through which no star shone. Snow was imminent.

Fewer kids observed the holiday this year, and of the ones who did a good number of them evidently took little pride in the imagination or lavishness of their disguises. Many were content to rub a little burnt cork on their faces and go out begging in their everyday clothes.

So much seemed to have changed. The whole world had become jaded, an inexorable machine of cynicism. Your mother dies unexpectedly, and they give you two days leave from your job. When you get back, people want to have even less to do with you than before. Strange how you can feel the loss of something that never seemed to be there in the first place. A dwarfish, cranky old woman dies... and all of a sudden there's a royal absence, as if a queen had cruelly vacated her throne. It was the difference between a night with a single fibrillating star in it and one without anything but smothering darkness.

But remember those times when she used to... No, nihil nisi bonum. Let the dead, et cetera, et cetera. Father M. had conducted an excellent service at the funeral home, and there was little point in ruining that perfect sense of finality the priest had managed to convey regarding the earthly phase of his mother's existence. So why bring her now into his thoughts? Night of the Dead, he remembered.

There were no longer very many emissaries of the deceased roaming the streets of the neighborhood. They had gone home, the ones who had left it in the first place. Might as well close up till next year, he thought. No, wait.

Here they are again, coming late in the evening as they did last year. Take off the coat, a sudden flash of warmth. The warming stars had returned, shining their true light once more. How they beamed, those two little points in the

blackness. Their stellar intensity went right into him, a bright tightness. He was now grateful for the predominant gloom of this year's Halloween, which only exacerbated his present state of delight. That they were wearing the same costumes as last year was more than he could have hoped.

“Trick or treat,” they said from afar, repeating the invocation when the man standing behind the glass door didn't respond and merely stood staring at them. Then he opened the door wide.

“Hello, happy couple. Nice to see you again. You remember me, the mailman?”

The children exchanged glances, and the boy said: “Yeah, sure.” The girl antiphonied with a giggle, enhancing his delight in the situation.

“Well, here we are one year later and you two are still dressed and waiting for the wedding to start. Or did it just get over with? At this rate you won't make any progress at all. What about next year? And the next? You'll never get any older, know what I mean? Nothing'll change. Is that okay with you?”

The children tried for comprehending nods but only achieved movements and facial expressions of polite bewilderment.

“Well, it's okay with me too. Confidentially, I wish things had stopped changing for me a long time ago. Anyway, how about some candy?”

The candy was proffered, the children saying “thaaank yooou” in the same way they said it at dozens of other houses. But just before they were allowed to continue on their way… he demanded their attention once more.

“Hey, I think I saw you two playing outside your house one day when I came by with the mail. It's that big white house over on Pine Court, isn't it?”

“Nope,” said the boy as he carefully inched his way down the porch stairs, trying not to trip over his costume. His sister had impatiently made it to the sidewalk already. “It's red with black shutters. On Ash.” Without waiting for a reaction to his answer he joined his sister, and side by side the bride and groom walked far down the street, for there didn't seem to be any other houses open for business nearby. He watched them become tiny in the distance, eventually disappear into the dark.

Cold out here, shut the door. There was nothing more to see; he had successfully photographed the encounter for the family album of his imagination. If anything, their faces glowed even brighter and clearer this year. Perhaps they really hadn't changed and never would. No, he thought in the darkness of his bedroom. Everything changes and always for the worst. But they wouldn't make any sudden transformations now, not in his thoughts. Again and again he brought them back to make sure they were the same.

He set his alarm clock to wake himself for early mass the next day. There was no one who would be accompanying him to church this year. He'd have to go alone.

Alone.

III

Next Halloween there was a premature appearance of snow, a thin foundation of whiteness that clung to the earth and trees, putting a pallid face on the suburb. In the moonlight it glittered, a frosty spume. This sparkling below was

mirrored by the stars positioned tenuously in the night above. A monstrous mass of snowclouds to the west threatened to intervene, cutting off the reflection from its source and turning everything into a dull emptiness. All sounds were hollowed by the cold, made into the cries of migrating birds in a vacant November dusk.

Not even November yet and look at it, he thought as he stared through the glass of his front door. Very few were out tonight, and the ones who were found fewer houses open to them, closed doors and extinguished porchlights turning them away to roam blindly through the streets. He had lost much of the spirit himself, had not even set out a jack-o-lantern to signal his harbor in the night.

Then again, how would he have carried around such a weighty object with his leg the way it was now? One good fall down the stairs and he started collecting disability pay from the government, laid up for months in the solitude of his home.

He had prayed for punishment and his prayers had been answered. Not the leg itself, which only offered physical pain and inconvenience, but the other punishment, the solitude. This was the way he remembered being corrected as a child: sent into the basement, exiled to the cold stone cellar without the relief of light, save for that which hazed in through a dusty window-well in the corner. In that corner he stood, near as he could to the light. It was there that he once saw a fly twitching in a spider web. He watched and watched and eventually the spider came out to begin feasting on its prey. He watched it all, dazed with horror and sickness. When it was over he wanted to do something. He did. With a predatory stealth he managed to pinch up the little

spider and pull it off its web. It tasted like nothing at all really, except a momentary tickle on his dry tongue.

“Trick or treat,” he heard. And he almost got up to arduously cane his way to the door. But the Halloween slogan had been spoken somewhere in the distance. Why did it sound so close for a moment? Crescendoing echoes of the imagination, where far is near, up is down, pain pleasure. Maybe he should close up for the night. There seemed to be only a few kids playing the game this year. Only the most desultory stragglers remained at this point. Well, there was one now.

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“You'll have to wait just a moment,” he called through the door as he struggled to get up from the sofa with the aid of his cane. Pain. Good, good. He picked up a full bag of candy from the coffee table and was quite prepared to bestow its entire contents on the little lady in black. But then he recognized who it was behind the cadaver-yellow make-up. Watch it. Wouldn't want to do anything unusual. Play you don't know who it is. And do not say anything concerning red houses with black shutters. Nothing about Ash Street.

To make matters worse, there was the outline of a parent standing on the sidewalk. Insure the safety of the last living child, he thought. But maybe there were others, though he'd only seen the brother and sister. Careful. Pretend she's unfamiliar; after all, she's wearing a different get-up from the

one she wore the past two years. Above all don't say a word about you know who.

And what if he should innocently ask where was her little brother this year? Would she say: “He was killed,” or maybe, “He's dead,” or perhaps just, “He's gone,” depending on how the parents handled the whole affair. With any luck, he would not have to find out.

He opened the door just far enough to hand out the candy and in a bland voice said: “Here you go, my little witch.” That last part just slipped out somehow.

“Thank you,” she said under her breath, under a thousand breaths of fear and experience. So did it seem.

She turned away, and as she descended the porch steps her broom clunked along one step behind her. An old, frayed, throwaway broom. Perfect for witches. And the kind perfect for keeping a child in line. An ugly old thing kept in a corner, an instrument of discipline always within easy reach, always within a child's sight until the thing became a dream-haunting image. Mother's broom.

After the girl and her mother were out of sight, he closed the door on the world and, having survived a tense episode, was actually grateful for the solitude that only minutes ago was the object of his dread.

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He was making it down the stairs in good time, considering the gloomy conditions he was working under. Neither this nor that nor gloom of night. Gloom of night. Dead of night. Night of the Dead.

With that odd sprightliness of cripples he ambled his way down the stairs, his cane always remaining a step ahead for support. Concentrate, he told his mind, which was starting to wander into strange places in the darkness. Watch out! Almost took a tumble that time. Finally he made it to the very bottom. A sound came through the wall from out on the front porch, a soft explosion it seemed. Good, they were still there. He could catch them and reassure his mind regarding the source of its fancies. The labor of walking down the stairs had left him rather hyperventilated and unsure about everything.

Trying to effect the shortest possible interval between the two operations, he turned the lock above the handle and pulled back the door as suddenly as he was able. A cold wind seeped in around the edges of the outer door, prowling its way past him and into the house. Out on the porch, there was no sign of a boyish trickster. Wait, yes there was.

He had to turn on the porchlight to see it. Directly in front of the door a jack-o-lantern had been heaved forcefully down onto the cement, caving in its pulpy shell which had exploded into fragments lying here and there on the porch. He opened the outer door for a closer look, and a swift wind invaded the house, flying past his head on frigid wings. What a blast, close the door. Close the door!

“Little buggers,” he said very clearly, an attempt to relieve his sense of disorder and delirium.

“Who, meezy-weezy?” said the voice behind him.

At the top of the stairs. A dwarfish silhouette, seemingly with something in its hand. A weapon. Well, he had his cane at least.

“How did you get in here, child?” he asked without being sure it really was a child, considering its strangely hybrid voice.

“Child yourself, sonny. No such things where I come from. No Sammy-Wammies either. I'm just in disguise.”

“How did you get in?” he repeated, still hoping to establish a rational manner of entry.

“In? I was already in.”

“Here?” he asked.

“No, not here. There-dee-dare.” The figure was pointing out the window at the top of the stairs, out at the kaleidoscopic sky. “Isn't it a beauty? No children, no anything.”

“What do you mean?” he inquired with oneiric inspiration, the normalcy of dream being the only thing that kept his mind together at this stage.

“Mean? I don't mean nothing, you meany.”

Double negative, he thought, relieved to have retained contact with a real world of grammatical propriety. Double negative: two empty mirrors reflecting each other's emptiness to infinite powers, nothing cancelling out nothing.

“Nothing?” he echoed with an interrogative inflection.

“Yup, that's where you're going.”

“How am I supposed to do that?” he asked, gripping his cane tightly, sensing a climax to this confrontation.

“How? Don't worry. You already made sure of how-wow-wow... TRICK OR TREAT!”

And suddenly the thing came gliding down through the darkness.

IV

He was found the next day by Father Mickiewicz, who had telephoned earlier after failing to see this clockwork parishioner appear as usual for early mass on All Souls Day. The door was wide open, and the priest discovered his body at the bottom of the stairs, its bathrobe and underclothes grotesquely disarranged. The poor man seemed to have taken another fall, a fatal one this time. Aimless life, aimless death: Thus was his death in keying with his life, as Ovid wrote. So ran the priest's ad hoc eulogy, though not the one he would deliver at the deceased's funeral.

But why was the door open if he fell down the stairs? Father M. came to ask himself. The police answered this question with theories about an intruder or intruders un-

known. Given the nature of the crime, they speculated on a revenge motive, which the priest's informal testimony was quick to contradict. The idea of revenge against such a man was far-fetched, if not totally meaningless. Yes, meaningless. Nevertheless, the motive was not robbery and the man seemed to have been beaten to death, possibly with his own cane. Later evidence showed that the corpse had been violated, but with an object much longer and more coarse than the cane originally supposed. They were now looking for something with the dimensions of a broomstick, probably a very old thing, splintered and decayed. But they would never find it in the places they were searching.

Mad Night Of Atonement (2011 Noctuary Version)

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A Future Tale

Once more from the beginning; once more until the end. You know who Dr. Francis Haxhausen was and how his disappearance affected the scientific world. There was dismay and confusion when one of the leading scientists on earth withdrew from an active life of research. And there was doubt, even anxiety, when he could no longer be reached for consultation on this or that question of urgent relevance to his former colleagues, if not to the vast body of the human race. Ah, the human race. Pacing the floors of gleaming labs, the geniuses in their long white smocks fretted about the missing man of science. They bore the stigmata of worry upon their faces and their voices grew quiet, like voices heard in the shadows of a lonely church. Rumors multiplied, panicky speculations were the order of the day. But however troubled certain people had become in the absence of Dr. Haxhausen, they were no less bothered by his sudden return from a strange retirement.

He was now quite a different man, shaking the hands of old friends and smiling with a warmth that was entirely out of character. “I've been traveling here and there,” he explained, though he avoided elaborating on this statement. For a time everyone kept an eye on Dr. Haxhausen, eager to

witness a revelation of some kind, or at least some clue to suggest what had happened to him. Consumed by a nerve-wracking vigilance, they could do nothing but wait. It was not long, however, before the inevitable conclusion had to be drawn: the unfortunate man had lost his reason, gone mad from years of overwork in the service of his calling. But perhaps there still remained some pretext for hoping that the scientist would recover. After all, he managed to avoid the constraints which some, including members of his own family, attempted to place upon his movements. And certainly this was an achievement that hinted at the survival of some measure of his old genius. Indeed, Dr. Haxhausen fought to preserve his freedom with very good reason, for he required a great deal of it—freedom, not reason—to pursue his plans for the future.

For almost a year he worked secretly, and alone, in an old, empty factory building located in an open field many miles from the nearest city. And into this building he brought a motley selection of mechanical devices and diverse objects of manifold use. Among Dr. Haxhausen's incongruous collection were included some of the most modern equipment and instruments of science, a number of which had only come into being since his disappearance. There were also items from far earlier historical periods and a few imported from cultures that would not be considered very far along the path of technological progress. Thus, Dr. Haxhausen unpacked several oddly shaped vessels decorated with strange glyphs and primitive images. And these clumsy vessels he rested upon a table among elegant containers of nearly invisible glass. Then he pieced together something that resembled a dirty drain spout or an old stovepipe. And

he placed it, for the moment, upon the immaculate metal surface of a computer, which was the color and texture of an eggshell.

More exotic or antiquated paraphernalia were revealed slumbering in crates and boxes: cauldrons, retorts, masks with wide-open mouths, alembics, bellows of different sizes, crusted bells that rang with dead voices, and rusted tongs that squeaked when manipulated; a large hourglass, a small telescope, shining swords and dull knives, a long wooden pitchfork with two hornlike prongs and a tall staff with a marvelously embellished headpiece; miniature bottles of very thick glass plugged with stoppers in the shape of human or animal heads, candles in ivory holders with curious carvings, bright beads, beautiful convex mirrors of perfect silver, golden chalices engraved with intricate designs and powerful phrases; huge books with brittle pages, a skull and some bones; doll-like figures made of dried vegetables, puppet-like figures made of wax and wood, and various little dummies composed of obscure materials. Finally, there was a shallow crate from which Dr. Haxhausen removed a vaguely circular object that seemed to be a flat stone, but a stone that was translucent and mottled like an opal with a spectrum of soft hues. And all these things the scientist brought together within his dim and drafty laboratory. Each, in his mind, would play its part in his design. Clearly his ideas about the practice of science had taken an incredible leap, though whether the direction was forward or backward remained to be seen.

For months he worked with a fevered industriousness and without worry or doubt, as though following some foreordained plan of assured success. Slowly his invention began

to take form out of the chaos of materials he had united in his project, a miscegenation that would give birth to a revolutionary artifact, a cross-bred assemblage of freakish novelty. And the result of his labors at last stood before him upon the cold and dusty floor of that factory, and he was pleased by the sight of it.

To the average eye, granted, Dr. Haxhausen's invention might have appeared as no more than a bizarre scrapheap, a hybrid of some inscrutable fancy. Dense and twisted, it branched out wildly in every direction, a mass of ragged metal. And it seemed just barely, or not all, integrated into a whole. Through dark hollows within the chaotic tangle of the apparatus, the faces of dolls and puppets peeked out like malicious children in hiding. Incorporated into the body of the invention, their dwarfish forms mingled with its circuitry; these figures alone, by their very presence, might have bred doubts as to the validity of the scientist's creation. And, as must already be apparent, the eccentricities of the machine did not end with a few idiotic faces.

Nevertheless, there was a certain feature of the invention that did appear to suggest some definite purpose. This was the long black tube projecting from the midst of the debris, rising from it in the manner of a cobra set for the attack. But in place of the cobra's pair of fascinating eyes, this artificial serpent was equipped with a single cyclopean socket in which was fixed a smooth disc of beautifully blended colors. When Dr. Haxhausen turned a dial on the remote control unit resting in his palm, the dark metallic beast reared back its head and, with a sinister grinding sound, directed its gaze up toward a grimy skylight. For years this window on the heavens had remained sealed. But that night, through the ef-

forts of the inexhaustible scientist, it was opened. And the spectral light of a full moon shone down into the old factory, pouring its beams into the opalescent eye of Dr. Haxhausen's machine. Later, when it seemed the beast was sated with its lunar nourishment, Dr. Haxhausen confidently flicked a switch on the remote control unit. And the moonlight, which had been digested and transmuted in the bowels of the beast, was now given back to its source, spewing forth as a stream of lurid colors into the blackness, a harsh spectrum which one witness later described to authorities as an “awful rainbow quivering across the night.” In the doctor's own description, this was called his Sacred Ray.

With the first stage of his project successfully completed, Dr. Haxhausen moved out of his secluded laboratory. His machine, along with other things, was loaded on a truck by some hired laborers. Thus, it could easily be transported from one place to another, to be exhibited before the eyes of any who would come to see it. And this is exactly what the scientist had in mind. Abandoning obscurity and breaking his silence, he once again allowed himself to be known to the world. Naturally there was a great deal of publicity, none of which was complimentary to the worth of the scientist's revelations, though some of which paid sad homage to the former glory of his delicate mind. But public reaction was of no concern to him. His task would in any case be carried out: the world was to be given notice, the annunciation made. So he continued to travel here and there. In rented venues of many cities, he demonstrated the power of his machine and spread the word to those who would hear it.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen,” he began a typical performance in a typically out-of-date movie theater in a

typical town. Standing alone on stage, Dr. Haxhausen was wearing an old dark suit. As if to simulate formal attire, he added a new bow tie. His hair was greased and combed but had been allowed to grow far too long to convey a well-groomed image. And his black framed eyeglasses now seemed far too large on the face of a man who had lost so much weight in the past year or so. Their thick lenses glinted in the glare of the footlights, which cast Dr. Haxhausen's gigantic and twisted shadow upon the threadbare curtain behind him.

"Some of you," he continued, "are perhaps aware of who I am and may have an idea of why I am here tonight. Others may be curious to discover the meaning of those handbills which have lately appeared around your town or possibly were intrigued by the marquee outside this theater which touts the 'World Famous Dr. Haxhausen.' Like many important events in human history, my exhibition has been somewhat accurately reported as far as its superficial aspects are concerned, yet remains sadly misrepresented in its substance. Allow me at this point to disabuse you of a few false conceptions which may have affected your powers of judgment.

"First, I do not claim to be either the Almighty Himself or His incarnation come down to earth; nor, in fact, am I one or the other of these things. Second, I nevertheless do claim that in the course of my recent travels, what the world has called my 'disappearance,' I was granted certain revelations directly from the Creator and in no uncertain terms received an itinerary of action from this same source. Third, and last, I am indeed the scientist known as Francis Henry Haxhausen and not, as can be conclusively proved, an impostor.

As an appendix to my previous statements, I should say that my exhibition is not the absurd extravaganza of scientific farce some have portrayed it to be, but a simple agenda consisting of a brief lecture followed by a practical demonstration of a device I have recently constructed. At no point do I attempt, either as an illusion or in fact, to work permanent damage on the body or soul of any member of my audience. That would be contrary to the Creator's law and the truth of His nature. And that is all I have to state in the way of a preamble to what I hope you will find an entertaining and enlightening attraction.

"I would like to open my lecture with the following anecdote. There is a legend, and I hasten to underline the word legend, that I learned while I was traveling here and there. It seems there was a sorcerer, or an alchemist or something along those lines, who dreamed of transforming the world through the creation of an artificial man. This man, the sorcerer dreamed, would not be subject to the flaws and limitations of the former type, but would instead live through many lifetimes, accumulating the knowledge and wisdom it would one day use to serve and improve the human race. The sorcerer, like all dreamers of this kind, was intent upon his vision and not particularly concerned with its ramifications in the larger scheme of things. Thus, he set about employing all his thaumaturgical arts in the creation of his 'new man.' First, a physical form was made out of the simple materials of wood and wax, resulting in a grotesque thing rather like a gigantic ventriloquist's dummy. Next, the sorcerer practiced a secret chemistry and a hermetic linguistics to elevate this lifeless effigy into a rather admirable semblance of a human being—fatefully admirable, I might add.

Without wasting a moment glorying in his own achievement, uttering not a single word of self-praise, the sorcerer engaged his creature in a course of learning that would enable it to function and evolve toward its destiny after the sorcerer's death. However, it was not long after this regimen had begun that the Omnipotent One realized what the sorcerer was intending to do. And so it happened that the creature, strong and well-coordinated but still a child in its mind, was awakened in the dead of night by a voice that cursed it as a blasphemy and an abomination. The voice bid the creature to go to its foul maker in the attic where he had sequestered himself among evil books and impure devices. Confused and terrified, the creature ascended several stairways and entered the attic. And there he found the sorcerer, motionless and hung upon the wall like something in a puppet-maker's workshop, his dark robe grazing the dusty floor and his head drooping down. Acting on a mechanical impulse beyond dread or despair, the creature lifted his master's head and saw that it was now no more than wood and wax. The sight was a maddening one, and it did not take long for the creature to find the rope with which it hanged itself from the rafters of the attic. Thus was concluded the judgment passed upon the house of the sorcerer."

There was a pause in the scientist's flow of words. Calmly, he pulled a handkerchief from the inner pocket of his coat and wiped his face, which was perspiring in the heat of the footlights. Then he briefly scanned the faces of his audience, many of which bore dumbfounded expressions, before resuming his lecture.

"Who can know the intentions of the Creator? That which is suited to human designs may not suit His. With

these rather unquestionable premises in mind, what conclusions might be drawn from the example of the sorcerer? By way of exegesis, I would say that the sorcerer, in conceiving a creature of limitless promise for good and none for evil, had violated a mysterious law, transgressed against a secret truth. And just how had he strayed from this law and this truth? Simply in this manner: he had failed to provide for the corruption of his creation, not merely as a possibility but as a fate. And it was precisely by this oversight that the sorcerer fell out of step with the Creator's own design. It is the vision of this Great Design that I have been privileged to see, and that is why I am here tonight. As a footnote, however, I should state that even before I was granted certain divine insights, I had already been traveling toward them, approaching their truth in the unconscious or accidental manner of great scientific discoveries. And I thus found myself somewhat in readiness to receive and accept the proffered vision.

"Let me explain that I have spent nearly all my life as a scientist in a methodically frantic pursuit of perfection, driven by the dream of utopia, by the idea that I indeed contributed to an earthly paradise *in the making*. But slowly, very slowly, I began to notice certain things. I noticed that there were mechanisms built into the system of reality that nullified all our advancements in this world, rerouting them into a hidden laboratory where these so-called blessings were cancelled out altogether, if not converted into formulas for our collapse. I noticed that there were higher forces working against us and working through us at the same time. On the one hand, our vision has always been of creating a world of perpetual vitality, despite our grudging recognition of death's 'necessity.' On the other hand, all we have

constructed is an elaborate façade to conceal our immortal traumas, a false front that hides the perennial ordeals of the human race. Oh, the human race. And I began to see that perfection has never been the point, that both the lost paradise of the past and the one sought in the future were merely convenient pretexts for our true destiny of... disintegration.

"As a scientist I have had the opportunity to observe the workings of the world at close quarters and over a relatively extended stretch of time, not to mention space. And after careful observation and painstaking verification I was forced to this conclusion: the world thrives on its faults and strives, by every possible means, to aggravate them, while at the same time masking them like a congenital deformity. The signs are everywhere, though I could not always read them.

"But if vitality and perfection are not the aim of this world, what in heaven's name is? That, my dear ladies and gentlemen, is the thrust of the second part of my exhibition, consisting of more comments by myself, a demonstration of my machine, and an entertaining display of what I might describe as a *tableau mort*. While I prepare things backstage, there will be a brief intermission. Thank you."

Dr. Haxhausen walked off the stage with sluggish dignity and, as soon as he was out of sight, the audience began chattering all at once, as if they had been simultaneously revived from a hypnotic trance. Most of them, in outrage, left the theater; some, however, stayed for the finale. And both reactions, as well as these relative proportions, were typical at each exhibition that Dr. Haxhausen held. Those who prematurely left the performance were content to believe they had been witnesses to nothing more than the interior theater of a madman. The others, intellectuals or neurotic voyeurs,

had convinced themselves that the former genius deserved a full hearing before the inevitable condemnation, while secretly dreading that something he had to show them would reverberate, however faintly, with truth.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Dr. Haxhausen, who seemed to reappear on stage out of nowhere. "Ladies and gentlemen," he repeated more quietly, and then fell silent for a rather extended moment. At this point no one was whispering in the audience; no one said a word.

"There are holy places in this world, and I have been to some of them. Places where the presence of something sacred can be felt like an invisible meteorology. Always these places are quiet, and often they are in ruins. The ones that are not already at some stage of dilapidation nonetheless display the signs and symptoms, the *promise* of coming decay. We feel a sense of divinity in ruined places, abandoned places—shattered temples on mountaintops, crumbling catacombs, islands where a stone idol stands almost faceless. We never have such feelings in our cities or even in natural settings where the flora and fauna are overly evident. This is why so much is atoned for in wintertime, when a numinous death descends on those chosen lands of our globe. Indeed, winter is not so much the holiest time as it is the holiest place, the visible *locus* of the divine. And after winter, spring. Thus turns the carousel of our planet, and all the others. But need it turn forever? I think not. For the ultimate winter draws near, ladies and gentlemen: the cycle of seasons, so the Creator has told me, is about to stop.

"He first spoke to me on a night during which I was wandering the tattered fringes of a city. It might have been a city like this one, or any city. What matters is the mute decrep-

itude I found there among a few condemned buildings and vacant lots gone wild. I had by then all but forgotten my own name, thereby giving up who I was and what world I belonged to. And they are not wrong who say that my reason perished in the radiant face of unattainable dreams for the future. False dreams, nightmares! And then, in that same place where I had traveled to hang myself, I heard a voice among the shadows and moonlight. It was not a peaceful voice or a consoling voice, but something like an articulate sigh, a fabulously eloquent moan. There was also a man-like shape slumped down in a corner of that sad room which I had chosen for my ultimate refuge. The legs of the figure lay bent like a cripple's upon the broken floor, the moonlight cutting across them and leaving the rest of the body in darkness—all except two eyes that shone like colored glass in the moonlight. And although the voice seemed to emanate from everything around me, I knew that it was the voice of that sad thing before me, which was the Creator's earthly form: a simple department store manikin.

“I was the chosen one, It said. I would carry the message which, like every annunciation from on high, would be despised or ignored by mankind. Because I, at that moment, could clearly read the signs present everywhere in the world since the beginning. I had already noted many of the hints and foreshadowings, the prophecies, and knew them as inspired clues the Creator had planted, prematurely revealing the nature of His world and its true destiny. And I felt the sacred aura radiated by the crumpled figure in the corner, and I understood the scripture of the Great Design.

“It was written in the hieroglyphics of humble things, things humble to the point of mockery. All the lonesome

pathetic things, all the desolate dusty things, all the misbegotten things, ruined things, failed things, all the imperfect semblances and deteriorating remnants of what we arrogantly deign to call the Real, to call... Life. In brief, the entire realm of the unreal—wherein He abides—is what He loves like nothing in this world. And haven't we ourselves at some time come face to face with this blessed realm? Can you recall ever having traveled down a deserted road and coming upon something like an old fairground: a desolate assemblage of broken booths and sagging tents, all of which you glimpsed through a high arching entranceway with colors like a rusted rainbow? Didn't it seem as if some great catastrophe had struck, leaving only lifeless matter to molder in silent anonymity? And were you sad to see a place of former gaiety lying in its grave? Did you attempt to revive it in your imagination, start up the dead machinery, and fill the midway once again with fresh colors and laughing faces? We have all done this, all attempted to resurrect the defunct. And this is precisely where we have separated ourselves from the law and the truth of the Creator. Were we in harmony with Him, our gaze would fall upon a thriving scene and perceive nothing there but ruins and the ghosts of puppets. These, ladies and gentlemen, are what delight His heart. This much He has confided to me.

"But the Creator's taste for the unreal has required something to be real in the first place, and then to wither into ruins, to fail gloriously. Hence—the World. Extend this premise to its logical conclusion and you have—curtain!—the Creator's Great Design." And as the curtain slowly began to rise, the scientist backed away and said in a giddy voice:

“But please don't think that when everything caves in there won't still be *muuusic*.”

The auditorium went black, and in the blackness there arose a hollow and tuneless melody which wandered to the wheezing accompaniment of a concertina, a pathetic duet belonging to a world of low cabarets or second-rate carnivals. Then, on either side of the stage, a tall glass case lit up to reveal that the two atrocious musicians were in fact life-size automatons, one of which pumped and pulled the snaking bellows of a concertina with a rigid motion of his arms, while the other scraped back and forth across the strings of a violin. The concertina player had his head thrown back in a wooden howl of merriment; the violin player stared down at his instrument in empty-eyed concentration. And both appeared lost in a kind of mechanical rapture.

The rest of the stage area, both above and below, also seemed to be occupied entirely by imitations of the human image: puppets and marionettes were strung up at various elevations, relieved of their weight by fragile glistening threads; manikins posed in a paralyzed leisure which looked at once grotesque and idyllic; other dummies and an odd assortment of dolls sat in miniature chairs here and there, or simply sprawled about the floorboards, sometimes propping each other back to back. But among these mock-people, as became evident the longer one gazed at the stage, were hidden real ones who, rather ably, imitated the imitations. (These were persons whom Dr. Haxhausen recruited, at fair recompense, whenever he entered a new town.) And forming the only scenery beyond both the artificial and the genuine figures of life was a gigantic luminescent mural in shades of black and white. With photographic accuracy, the mural

portrayed a desolate room which might have been an attic or an old studio, and which contained some pieces of nondescript debris strewn about. A single, frameless window set into the torn wall at the rear of the room looked out upon a landscape that was still more desolate than the room itself. It was a view of the earth and sky merged into a gray and jagged scene that jerked about like a silent movie.

"You see how things are, ladies and gentlemen. Whereas we have been dreaming so long of creating perfect life in the laboratory, the Creator holds sacred only the crude facsimile, which best echoes or expresses His own will. He has always been far ahead of us, envisioning a completed work at the end of history. And He has no more time to linger over the vital stage of universal evolution. Because no truth or life can exist in us as we are, for truth and life can only exist in the mind, the will of the Creator—and we have stubbornly made it our business to do nothing but oppose that mind, that will. We are simply the raw material for His beloved puppets, which reflect to perfection the truth of the Creator and are the ideal dwellers in His paradise of ruins. And after His chosen ones are triumphantly installed in that good place, the Creator has some wonderful stories to tell as a way to pass the hours of eternity.

"And we may loiter among those in paradise, this is the great news I bring to you tonight. We may take our place among the puppets, as the tableau you see before you will serve to demonstrate. For at the moment there are certain faces insinuated within this elect company that do not... *be-long*, that stand out in an unpleasant way. How to bring them into the fold is the question. And the answer, if you

will turn for a moment and direct your eyes toward the balcony, the answer—spotlight!—is the puppet machine."

Turning their heads as instructed, the audience saw the object which, under the sharp spotlight, seemed to be resting on nothing, as if secured to the darkness itself. Some of the more observant members of the audience noticed the shining waxen faces whose eyes looked back at them from within the bizarre contraption. Set in motion by the remote control device in Dr. Haxhausen's coat pocket, the machine noisily elevated its stovepipe neck and pointed its single, iridescent eye at the figures upon the stage.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I mentioned earlier that winter is the sacred state of things, the season of the soul. But that is not to say that the definitive winter we are approaching will be without all the colors of the spectrum. For it is the frigid aurora of the Sacred Ray, the very eye of the Creator, that will bring about the wondrous conversion of all things. As you can see, the design is His own. And, by means of modern assembly techniques, a sufficient quantity may be produced to serve the world, bathing every one of us in the garish radiance of our destiny. The effects? If you just keep watching your fellows upon this stage.

"There. See how the shafts of color pour down upon this stark scene, overlaying surfaces with an uncanny kaleidoscopic tint. It is the old surfaces that must be stripped away and disposed of. Time to leap from that summit of illusion our world has achieved, a glorious plummet after so many centuries in which we *erred on the side of excellence*. I must announce, however, that even if what the Creator had in mind was a third-rate sideshow of beatific puppetry, our labors to attain progress and perfection were not useless.

They were simply mistaken as to their ultimate aim. For it is our modern world in all its phases—and during the very era in which we live—that will allow us the means to realize the Creator's dream, and to unrealize all the rest. See for yourselves. Look what is happening to the flesh of these future puppets. Wax and wood and shining glass now replace the sad and cumbersome structures of biology."

In the audience a few low sounds propagated into a network of obscure whispers and murmurings. Faces leaned toward the spectacle of crazy puppets painted with light, Dr. Haxhausen's *tableau mort*. Some persons betrayed their cautious temperaments by dropping down in their seats, expanding the distance between themselves and the stream of colors that flowed over their heads on its way to the stage. Dr. Haxhausen continued to preach above the shapeless, droning music.

"Please do not concern yourselves that any lasting conversion is being worked upon the people in this exhibition. I told you earlier that I would do no such thing. In the absence of a willing heart, the conversion you have witnessed would be the greatest sin in the universe, the unpardonable sin. There. The Sacred Ray has been extinguished. Your friends are again as they once were. And I thank you for coming to see me. Good night."

When the curtain descended and the house lights came on, an elderly woman in the audience stood up and called out to Dr. Haxhausen: "The Lord saith, 'And if the prophet be deceived when he has spoken a thing, I the Lord have deceived that prophet, and I will stretch out my hand upon him, and will destroy him from the midst of my people Israel.'" Others simply laughed or shook their heads in dis-

gust. But Dr. Haxhausen remained silent, smiling placidly as the congregation filed out of the theater.

The scientist, it seemed, was truly mad.

Now let us speak a few words by way of an epilogue. Although certain people will attach themselves to virtually any innovation of a mystical nature, the prophecies of Dr. Haxhausen never found a following. Soon the scientist himself lapsed in notoriety, save for an occasional blurb in some newspaper, a passing mention which often implied that Dr. Haxhausen's later role as a crank doomsayer had, in the public mind, entirely eclipsed his former renown as a man of science. Finally, on a particular evening in December, as a sparse audience populated for the most part by boozy derelicts and noisy adolescents awaited the notorious exhibition in a dreary banquet hall, it seemed that another visionary's career was destined for oblivion. When the world famous hallucinator did not appear at the publicized time, someone took it upon himself to pull back the makeshift curtain of a makeshift stage. And there, gently swinging from the long sooty gibbet of his fantastic machine, hung Dr. Haxhausen. Whether the cause of death should have been deemed murder or the more apparent one of suicide was never discovered. For something else happened that same winter night that threw all other events into the background.

But of course you know, ladies and gentlemen, what it was that happened. I can see by the glitter in your eyes, the flush on your waxen faces, that you remember well how the colors appeared in the sky that night, a fabulous aurora sent by the sun and reflected by the moon, so that either hemisphere of the world would be baptized at once by the spectral light of truth. Willing or not, your hearts had heard the

voice of the creature you thought mad. But they would not listen; they never have. Why did you force this transgression of divine law? And why do you still gaze with your wooden hate from the ends of the earth? It was for you that I committed this last and greatest sin, all for you. When have you ever appreciated these gestures from on high! And for this act I must now exist in eternal banishment from the paradise in which you rejoice. How beautiful is your everlasting ruin.

Oh, blessed puppets, receive My prayer, and teach Me to make Myself in *thy* image.

Mad Night Of Atonement (1994 Noctuary Version)

First published in *Grue Magazine* #9, 1989

A Future Tale

Once more from the beginning; once more until the end. You know who Dr Francis Haxhausen was and how his disappearance affected the scientific world. There was dismay and confusion when one of the leading scientists on earth withdrew from an active life of research. And there was doubt, even anxiety, when he could no longer be reached for consultation on this or that question of urgent relevance to his former colleagues, if not to the vast body of the human race. Ah, the human race. Pacing the floors of gleaming labs, the geniuses in their long white smocks fretted about the missing man of science: they bore the stigmata of worry upon their faces and their voices grew quiet, like voices heard in the shadows of a lonely church. Rumors multiplied, panicky speculations were the order of the day. But however troubled certain people had become in the absence of Dr Haxhausen, they were no less bothered by his sudden return from a strange retirement.

He was now quite a different man, shaking the hands of old friends and smiling with a warmth that was entirely out of character. “I've been travelling here and there,” he explained, though he avoided elaborating on this statement. For a time everyone kept an eye on Dr Haxhausen, eager to

witness a revelation of some kind, or at least some clue to suggest what had happened to him. And how nerve-wracking vigilance can be. It was not long, however, before the inevitable conclusion had to be drawn: the unfortunate man had lost his reason, gone mad from years of overwork in the service of his calling. But perhaps there still remained some pretext for hoping that the scientist would recover. After all, he managed to avoid the constraints, which some, including members of his own family, attempted to place upon his movements. And certainly this was an achievement that hinted at the survival of some measure of his old genius. Indeed, Dr Haxhausen fought to preserve his freedom with very good reason, for he required a great deal of it—freedom, not reason—to pursue his plans for the future.

For almost a year he worked secretly, and alone, in an old, empty factory building located in an open field many miles from the nearest city. And into this building he brought a motley array of equipment—objects, devices, and machinery that belonged to quite different times and places, diverse worlds of human creation. There were of course the most modern machines and instruments of science, some of which had only come into being since Dr Haxhausen's disappearance. But there were also items of far earlier historical periods—and a few imported from cultures that would not be considered very far along the path of technological progress. Thus, Dr Haxhausen unpacked several oddly shaped vessels decorated with strange glyphs and primitive images. And these clumsy vessels he rested upon a table among elegant containers of nearly invisible glass. Then he pieced together something that resembled a dirty drainspout or an old stovepipe. And he placed it, for the moment, upon the

immaculate metal surface of a computer, which was the color and texture of an eggshell.

More exotic or antiquated paraphernalia were revealed slumbering in crates and boxes: cauldrons, retorts, masks with wide-open mouths, alembics, bellows of different sizes, crusted bells that rang with dead voices, and rusted tongs that squeaked when manipulated; a large hourglass, a small telescope, shining swords and dull knives, a long wooden pitchfork with two hornlike prongs, and a tall staff with marvelously embellished headpiece; miniature bottles of very thick glass plugged with stoppers in the shape of human or animal heads, candles in ivory holders with curious carvings, bright beads, beautiful convex mirrors of perfect silver, golden chalices engraved with intricate designs and powerful phrases; huge books with brittle pages, a skull and some bones; doll-like figures made of dried vegetables, puppet-like figures made of wax and wood, and various little dummies composed of obscure materials. Finally, there was a shallow crate from which Dr Haxhausen removed a vaguely circular object that seemed to be a flat stone, but a stone that was translucent and mottled like an opal with a spectrum of soft hues. And all these things the scientist brought together within his dim and drafty laboratory: each, in his mind, would play its part in his design. Clearly his ideas about the practice of science had taken an incredible leap, though whether the direction was forward or backward remained to be seen.

For months he worked with a mechanical industriousness and without worry or doubt, as though following some foreordained plan of assured success. Slowly his invention began to take form out of the chaos of materials he had

united in his experiment, a miscegenation that would give birth to a revolutionary artifact, a cross-bred assemblage of freakish novelty. And the result of his labors at last stood before him upon the cold and dusty floor of that factory, and he was pleased by the sight of it.

To the average eye, granted, Dr Haxhausen's invention might have appeared as no more than a bizarre scrapheap, a hybrid of some inscrutable fancy. Dense and unbeautiful, it branched out wildly in every direction, a mad foliage of ragged metal. And it seemed just barely, or not all, integrated into a whole. Through dark hollows within the chaotic tangle of the apparatus, the faces of dolls and puppets peeked out like malicious children in hiding. Incorporated into the body of the invention, their dwarfish forms mingled with its circuitry; these figures alone, by their very presence, might have bred doubts as to the validity of the scientist's creation. And, as must already be apparent, the eccentricities of the machine did not end with a few idiotic faces.

Nevertheless, there was a certain feature of the invention that did appear to suggest some definite purpose. This was the long black tube projecting from the midst of the debris, rising from it in the manner of a cobra set for the attack. But in place of the cobra's pair of fascinating eyes, this artificial serpent was equipped with a single cyclopean socket in which was fixed a smooth disc of beautifully blended colors. When Dr Haxhausen turned a dial on the remote control unit resting in his palm, the dark metallic beast reared back its head and, with a sinister grinding sound, directed its gaze up toward a grimy skylight. For years this window on the heavens had remained sealed. But that night, through the efforts of the inexhaustible scientist, it was opened. And the

spectral light of a full moon shone down into the old factory, pouring its beams into the opalescent eye of Dr Haxhausen's machine. Later, when it seemed the beast was sated with its lunar nourishment, Dr Haxhausen confidently flicked a switch on the remote control unit. And the moonlight, which had been digested and transmuted in the bowels of the beast, was now given back to its source, spewing forth as a stream of lurid colors into the blackness, a harsh spectrum which one witness later described to authorities as an “awful rainbow quivering across the night.” In the doctor's own description, this was called his Sacred Ray.

With the first stage of his project successfully completed, Dr Haxhausen moved out of his secluded laboratory. His machine, along with other things, was loaded on a truck by some hired laborers. Thus, it could easily be transported from one place to another, to be exhibited before the eyes of any who would come to see it. And this is exactly what the scientist had in mind. Abandoning obscurity and breaking his silence, he once again allowed himself to be known to the world. Naturally there was a great deal of publicity, none of which was complimentary to the worth of the scientist's revelations, though some of which paid sad homage to the former glory of his delicate mind. But public reaction was of no concern to him. His task would in any case be carried out: the world was to be given notice, the annunciation made. So he continued to travel here and there: in rented halls and auditoriums of many cities, he demonstrated the powers of his machine and spread the word to those who would hear it.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen,” he began a typical performance in a typically out-of-date movie theater in a

typical town. Standing alone on stage, Dr Haxhausen was wearing an old dark suit; as if to simulate formal attire, he added a new bow tie. His hair was greased and combed but had been allowed to grow far too long to convey a well-groomed image. And his black-framed eyeglasses now seemed far too large on the face of a man who had lost so much weight in the past year or so. Their thick lenses glinted in the glare of the footlights, which cast Dr Haxhausen's gigantic and twisted shadow upon the threadbare curtain behind him.

"Some of you," he continued, "are perhaps aware of who I am and may have an idea of why I am here tonight. Others of you may be curious to discover the meaning of those handbills which have lately appeared around your town or possibly were intrigued by the marquee outside this theater which touts the 'World Famous Dr Haxhausen.' Like many important events in human history, my exhibition has been somewhat accurately reported as far as its superficial aspects are concerned, yet remains sadly misrepresented in its substance. Allow me at this point to disabuse you of a few false conceptions which may have affected your powers of judgment.

"First, I do not claim to be either the Almighty Himself or His incarnation come down to earth; nor, in fact, am I one or the other of these things. Second, I nevertheless do claim that in the course of my recent travels, what the world has called my 'disappearance', I was granted certain revelations directly from the Creator and in no uncertain terms received an itinerary of action from this same source. Third, and last, I am indeed the scientist known as Francis Henry Haxhausen and not, as can be conclusively proved, an imposter.

As an appendix to my previous statements, I should say that my exhibition is not the absurd extravaganza of scientific farce some have portrayed it to be, but a simple agenda consisting of a brief lecture followed by a practical demonstration of a device I have recently constructed. At no point do I attempt, either as an illusion or in fact, to work permanent damage on the body or soul of any member of my audience. That would be contrary to the Creator's law and the truth of His nature. And that is all I have to state in the way of a preamble to what I hope you will find an entertaining and enlightening attraction.

"I would like to open my lecture with the following anecdote. There is a legend, and I hasten to underline the word legend, that I learned while I was travelling here and there. It seems there was a sorcerer, or an alchemist or something along those lines, who dreamed of transforming the world through the creation of an artificial man. This man, the sorcerer dreamed, would not be subject to the flaws and limitations of the former type, but would instead live through many lifetimes, accumulating the knowledge and wisdom it would one day use to serve and improve the human race. The sorcerer, like all dreamers of this kind, was intent upon his vision and not particularly concerned with its ramifications in a larger scheme of things. Thus, he set about employing all his thaumaturgical arts in the creation of his 'new man.' First, a physical form was made out of the simple materials of wood and wax, resulting in a grotesque thing rather like a gigantic ventriloquist's dummy. Next, the sorcerer practiced a secret chemistry and a hermetic linguistics to elevate this lifeless effigy into a rather admirable semblance of human life—fatefully admirable, I might add.

Without wasting a moment glorying in his own achievement, uttering not a single word of self-praise, the sorcerer engaged his creature in a course of learning that would enable it to function and evolve toward its destiny after the sorcerer's death. However, it was not long after this regimen had begun that the Omnipotent One realized what the sorcerer was intending to do. And so it happened that the creature, strong and well-coordinated but still a child in its mind, was awakened in the dead of night by a voice that cursed it as a blasphemy and an abomination. The voice bid the creature to go to its foul maker in the attic where he had sequestered himself among evil books and impure devices. Confused and terrified, the creature ascended several stairways and entered the attic. And there he found the sorcerer, motionless and hung upon the wall like something in a puppet-maker's workshop, his dark robe grazing the dusty floor and his head drooping down. Acting on a mechanical impulse beyond dread or despair, the creature raised up his master's head and saw that it was now no more than wood and wax. The sight was a maddening one, and it did not take long for the creature to find the rope with which it hung itself from the rafters of the attic. Thus was concluded the judgment passed upon the house of the sorcerer."

There was a pause in the scientist's flow of words. Calmly, he pulled a handkerchief from the inner pocket of his coat and wiped his face, which was perspiring in the heat of the footlights. Then he briefly scanned the faces of his audience, many of which bore dumbfounded expressions, before resuming his lecture.

"Who can know the intentions of the Creator? That which is suited to human designs may not suit His. With

these rather unquestionable premises in mind, what conclusions might be drawn from the example of the sorcerer? By way of exegesis, I would say that the sorcerer, in conceiving a creature of limitless promise for good and none for evil, had violated a mysterious law, transgressed against a secret truth. And how had he strayed from this law and this truth? Simply in this manner: he had failed to provide for the corruption of his creation, not merely as a possibility but as a fate. And it was precisely by this oversight that the sorcerer fell out of step with the Creator's own design. It is the vision of this Great Design that I have been privileged to see, and that is why I am here tonight. As a footnote, however, I should state that even before I was granted certain divine insights, I had already been travelling toward them, approaching their truth in the "unconscious or accidental manner of great scientific discoveries. And I thus found myself somewhat in readiness to receive and accept the proffered vision.

"Let me explain that I have spent nearly all my life as a scientist in a methodically frantic pursuit of perfection, driven by the dream of Utopia, by the idea that I indeed contributed to an earthly paradise in the making. But slowly, very slowly, I began to notice certain things. I noticed that there were mechanisms built into the system of reality that nullified all our advancements in this world, that rerouted them into a hidden laboratory where these so-called blessings were cancelled out altogether, if not converted into formulas for our collapse. I noticed that there were higher forces working against us and working through us at the same time. On the one hand, our vision has always been of creating a world of perpetual vitality, despite our grudging recognition of death's 'necessity.' On the other hand, all we

have constructed is an elaborate façade to conceal our immortal traumas—a false front that hides the perennial ordeals of the human race. Oh, the human race. And I began to see that perfection has never been the point, that both the lost paradise of the past and the one sought in the future were merely convenient pretexts for our true destiny of... disintegration.

"As a scientist I have had the opportunity to observe the workings of the world at close quarters and over a relatively extended stretch of time, not to mention space. And after careful observation and painstaking verification I was forced to this conclusion: the world thrives on its faults and strives, by every possible means, to aggravate them, while at the same time to mask them like a congenital deformity. The signs are everywhere, though I could not always read them.

"But if vitality and perfection are not the aim of this world, what in heaven's name is? That, my dear ladies and gentlemen, is the thrust of the second part of my exhibition, consisting of more comments by myself, a demonstration of my machine, and an entertaining display of what I might describe as a tableau mort. While I prepare things backstage, there will be a brief intermission. Thank you."

Dr Haxhausen walked off the stage with sluggish dignity and, as soon as he was out of sight, the audience began chattering all at once, as if they had been simultaneously revived from a hypnotic trance. Most of them, in outrage, left the theater; some, however, stayed for the finale. And both reactions, as well as these relative proportions, were typical at each exhibition that Dr Haxhausen held. Those who prematurely left the performance were content to believe they had been witnesses to nothing more than the interior theater of

a madman. The others, intellectuals or neurotic voyeurs, had convinced themselves that the former genius deserved a full hearing before the inevitable condemnation, while secretly dreading that something he had to show them would reverberate, however faintly, with truth.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Dr Haxhausen, who seemed to reappear on stage out of nowhere. "Ladies and gentlemen," he repeated more quietly, and then fell silent for a rather extended moment. And no one was whispering in the audience; no one said a word.

"There are holy places in this world, and I have been to some of them. Places where the presence of something sacred can be felt like an invisible meteorology. Always these places are quiet, and often they are in ruins. The ones that are not already at some stage of dilapidation nonetheless display the signs and symptoms, the promise of coming decay. We feel a sense of divinity in ruined places, abandoned places—shattered temples on mountaintops, crumbling catacombs, islands where a stone idol stands almost faceless. We never have such feelings in our cities or even in natural settings where the flora and fauna are overly evident. This is why so much is atoned for in wintertime, when a numinous death descends on those chosen lands of our globe. Indeed, winter is not so much the holiest time as it is the holiest place, the visible locus of the divine. And after winter, spring; thus turns the carousel of our planet, and all the others. But need it turn forever? I think not. For the ultimate winter draws near, ladies and gentlemen: the cycle of seasons, so the Creator has told me, is about to stop.

"He first spoke to me on a night which I had spent wandering the tattered fringes of a city. It might have been a city

like this one, or any city. What matters is the mute decrepitude I found there among a few condemned buildings and vacant lots gone wild. I had all but forgotten my own name, who I was and what world I belonged to. And they are not wrong who say that my reason perished in the radiant face of unattainable dreams for the future. False dreams, nightmares! And then, in that same place where I had travelled to hang myself, I heard a voice among the shadows and moonlight. It was not a peaceful voice or a consoling voice, but something like an articulate sigh, a fabulously eloquent moan. There was also a man-like shape slumped down in a corner of that sad room which I had chosen for my ultimate refuge. The legs of the figure lay bent like a cripple's upon the broken floor, the moonlight cutting across them and leaving the rest of the body in darkness—all except two eyes that shone like colored glass in the moonlight. And although the voice seemed to emanate from everything around me, I knew that it was the voice of that sad thing before me, which was the Creator's earthly form: a simple department store mannikin.

"I was the chosen one, It said. I would carry the message which, like every annunciation from on high, would be despised or ignored by mankind. Because I, at that moment, could clearly read the signs which had been present everywhere in the world since the beginning. I had already noted many of the hints and foreshadowings, the prophecies, and knew them as inspired clues the Creator had planted, prematurely revealing the nature of His world and its true destiny. And I felt the sacred aura radiated by the crumpled figure in the corner, and I understood the scripture of the Great Design.

“It was written in the hieroglyphics of humble things, things humble to the point of mockery. All the lonesome pathetic things, all the desolate dusty things, all the misbegotten things, ruined things, failed things, all the imperfect semblances and deteriorating remnants of what we arrogantly deign to call the Real, to call… Life. In brief, the entire realm of the unreal—wherein He abides—is what He loves like nothing in this world. And haven't we ourselves at some time come face to face with this blessed realm? Can you recall ever having travelled down a deserted road and coming upon something like an old fairground: a desolate assemblage of broken booths and sagging tents, all of which you glimpsed through a high arcing entranceway with colors like a rusted rainbow? Didn't it seem as if some great catastrophe had struck, leaving only lifeless matter to molder in silent anonymity? And were you sad to see a place of former gaiety lying in its grave? Did you attempt to revive it in your imagination, start up the dead machinery, and fill the midway once again with fresh colors and laughing faces? We have all done this, all attempted to resurrect the defunct. And this is precisely where we have separated ourselves from the law and the truth of the Creator. Were we in harmony with Him, our gaze would fall upon a thriving scene and perceive nothing there but ruins and the ghosts of puppets. These, ladies and gentlemen, are what delight His heart. This much He has confided to me.

“But the Creator's taste for the unreal has required something to be real in the first place, and then to wither into ruins, to fail gloriously. Hence—the World. Extend this premise to its logical conclusion and you have—curtain!—the Creator's Great Design.” And as the curtain slowly began

to rise, the scientist backed away and said in a giddy voice: “But please don't think that when everything caves in there won't still be muuusic.”

The auditorium went black, and in the blackness arose a hollow and tuneless melody which wandered to the wheezing accompaniment of a concertina, a pathetic duet belonging to a world of low cabarets or second-rate carnivals. Then, on either side of the stage, a tall glass case lit up to reveal that the two atrocious musicians were in fact life-size automatons, one of which pumped and pulled the snaking bellows of a concertina with a rigid motion of his arms, while the other scraped back and forth across the strings of a violin. The concertina player had his head thrown back in a wooden howl of merriment; the violin player stared down in empty-eyed concentration at his instrument. And both appeared lost in a kind of mechanical rapture.

The rest of the stage area, both above and below, also seemed to be occupied entirely by imitations of the human image: puppets and marionettes were strung-up at various elevations, relieved of their weight by fragile glistening threads; mannikins posed in a paralyzed leisure which looked at once grotesque and idyllic; other dummies and an odd assortment of dolls sat in miniature chairs here and there, or simply sprawled about the floorboards, sometimes propping each other back to back. But among these mock-people, as became evident the longer one gazed at the stage, were hidden real ones who, rather ably, imitated the imitations. (These were persons whom Dr Haxhausen recruited, at fair recompense, whenever he entered a new town.) And forming the only scenery beyond both the artificial and the genuine figures of life was a gigantic luminescent mural in

shades of black and white. With photographic accuracy, the mural portrayed a desolate room which might have been an attic or an old studio, and which contained some pieces of nondescript debris strewn about. A single, frameless window set into the torn wall at the rear of the room looked out upon a landscape that was still more desolate than the room itself: earth and sky had merged into a gray and jagged scene.

"You see how things are, ladies and gentlemen. Whereas we have been dreaming so long of creating perfect life in the laboratory, the Creator holds sacred only the crude facsimile, which best echoes or expresses His own will. He has always been far ahead of us, envisioning a completed work at the end of history. And He has no more time to linger over the vital stage of universal evolution. Because no truth or life can exist in us as we are, for truth and life can only exist in the mind, the will of the Creator—and we have stubbornly made it our business to do nothing but oppose that mind, that will. We are simply the raw material for His beloved puppets, which reflect to perfection the truth of the Creator and are the ideal dwellers in His paradise of ruins. And after His chosen ones are triumphantly installed in that good place, the Creator has some wonderful stories to tell as a way to pass the hours of eternity.

"And we may be among those in paradise, this is the great news I bring to you tonight. We may take our place among the puppets, as the tableau you see before you will serve to demonstrate. For at the moment there are certain faces insinuated within this elect company that do not… belong, that stand out in an unpleasant way. How to bring them into the fold is the question. And the answer, if you will turn for

a moment and direct your eyes toward the balcony, the answer—spotlight!—is the puppet machine."

Turning their heads as instructed, the audience saw the object which, under the sharp spotlight, seemed to be resting on nothing, as if secured to the darkness itself. Some of the more observant members of the audience noticed the shining waxen faces whose eyes looked back at them from within the bizarre contraption. Set in motion by the remote control device in Dr Haxhausen's coat pocket, the machine noisily elevated its stovepipe neck and pointed its single, iridescent eye at the figures upon the stage.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I mentioned earlier that winter is the sacred state of things, the season of the soul. But that is not to say that the definitive winter we are approaching will be without all the colors of the rainbow. For it is the frigid aurora of the Sacred Ray, the very eye of the Creator, that will bring about the wondrous conversion of all things. As you can see, the design is His own. And, by means of modern assembly techniques, a sufficient quantity may be produced to serve the world, bathing every one of us in the garish radiance of our destiny. The effects? If you just keep watching your fellows upon this stage.

"There. See how the shafts of color pour down upon this stark scene, overlaying surfaces with an uncanny kaleidoscopic tint. It is the old surfaces that must be stripped away and disposed of. Time to leap from that summit of illusion our world has achieved, a glorious plummet after so many centuries in which we erred on the side of excellence. When all the Creator had in mind was a third-rate sideshow of beatific puppetry. But our strainings for progress were not useless; they were simply mistaken as to their ultimate aim. For

it is modern science itself which will enable us to realize the Creator's dream, and to unrealize all the rest. See for yourselves. Look what is happening to the flesh of these future puppets, and to their eyes: wax and wood and shining glass to replace the sad and cumbersome structures of biology."

In the audience a few low sounds propagated into a network of obscure whispers and murmurings. Faces leaned toward the spectacle of crazy puppets painted with light, Dr Haxhausen's tableau mort. Some persons betrayed their cautious temperaments by dropping down in their seats, expanding the distance between themselves and the stream of colors that flowed over their heads on its way to the stage. Dr Haxhausen continued to preach above the shapeless, droning music.

"Please do not concern yourselves that any lasting conversion is being worked upon the people in this exhibition. I told you earlier that I would do no such thing. In the absence of a willing heart, the conversion you have witnessed would be the greatest sin in the universe, the unpardonable sin. There. The Sacred Ray has been extinguished. Your friends are again as they once were. And I thank you for coming to see me. Good night."

When the curtain descended and the house lights came on, an elderly woman in the audience stood up and called out to Dr Haxhausen: "The Lord saith, 'And if the prophet be deceived when he has spoken a thing, I the Lord have deceived that prophet, and I will stretch out my hand upon him, and will destroy him from the midst of my people Israel.'" Others simply laughed or shook their heads in disgust. But Dr Haxhausen remained silent, smiling placidly as

the congregation filed out of the theater. The scientist, it seemed, was truly mad.

A few remarks by way of an epilogue. Although certain people will attach themselves to virtually any innovation of a mystical nature, the prophecies of Dr Haxhausen never found a following. Soon the scientist himself lapsed in notoriety, save for an occasional blurb in some newspaper, a passing mention which often implied that Dr Haxhausen's later role as a crank doomsayer had, in the public mind, entirely eclipsed his former renown as a man of science. Finally, on a particular evening in December, as a sparse audience populated for the most part by boozy derelicts and noisy adolescents awaited the notorious exhibition in a dreary banquet hall, it seemed that another visionary's career was destined for oblivion. When the world famous hallucinator did not appear at the publicized time, someone took it upon himself to pull back the makeshift curtain of a makeshift stage. And there, gently swinging from the long sooty gibbet of his fantastic machine, hung Dr Haxhausen. Whether the cause of death should have been deemed murder or the more apparent one of suicide was never discovered. For something else happened that same winter night that threw all other events into the background.

But of course you know, ladies and gentlemen, what it was that happened. I can see by the glitter in your eyes, the flush on your waxen faces, that you remember well how the colors appeared in the sky that night, a fabulous aurora sent by the sun and reflected by the moon, so that all the world would be baptized at once by the spectral light of truth. Willing or not, your hearts had heard the voice of the creature you thought mad. But they would not listen; they never

have. Why did you force this transgression of divine law? And why do you still gaze with your wooden hate from the ends of the earth? It was for you that I committed this last and greatest sin, all for you. When have you ever appreciated these gestures from on high! And for this act I must now exist in eternal banishment from the paradise in which you exalt. How beautiful is your everlasting ruin.

Oh, blessed puppets, receive My prayer, and teach Me to make Myself in thy image.

Ten Steps To Thin Mountain (2011 Noctuary Version)

First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu #68*, 1989.

1. One day I saw it on a very old map: Thin Mountain. No elevation was noted. In my mind vague images began to form. I set the map aside and closed my eyes. Then there was a sudden commotion, the kind that may start up anyplace, whether on a train rocking along its tracks or just around an old bench somewhere. A group of people ran by me, waving their arms and making odd noises. What was it that suddenly made me reach for the old map, only to find it was gone? And I just sat there wondering what things were like on Thin Mountain.

2. No one knows all the legends inspired by Thin Mountain, but there are a few I've recently picked up—that its atmosphere will turn you into a raving visionary in a matter of hours, that after a few days you experience strange yearnings that are impossible to fulfill, that longtime residents become immortal and after death walk the mountain woods as skeletons. What can you expect from hearsay? But one thing is certain among these conjectures: no one wants to give Thin Mountain a chance.

3. Only one way to Thin Mountain: absolute madness. There is no pretense to esoteric knowledge in this statement. It is simple enough. Once you find that no one will vouch for your sanity, that is when you know you are making progress. You have become... wayward. To be at eye level with the

world leads nowhere. When your gaze slips off the horizontal, though, hope becomes part of the equation. A grinning dwarf beckons you from the ledge of a tall building, gargoyles perched on cathedrals angle their snouts in your direction. And before you know it, you're lying around on Thin Mountain!

4. Not all that I have discovered about Thin Mountain is glamorous. Despite a great deal of picturesque scenery—floating strands of mists, crooked trees, fabulous fingerlike peaks—this region contains more than a few perils. One of them is a solitude fit only for fanatics of exile, their eyes always draining the distances. Another is a wind which seems to be composed of countless tiny voices, the chattering populace of an invisible universe. The half-lit days and the sorcery of its nights, moments in which nothing moves and others in which everything stirs ceaselessly. But what would you expect from a place called Thin Mountain?

5. Once I heard the words “Thin Mountain” spoken in a crowd. Did I say that I saw who said them? I did not. It could have been anyone standing along the platform, waiting for the train to arrive. The same day someone threw himself under that train. He was cut in half... but what a happy expression was plastered on the face of that corpse. “Thin Mountain!” I couldn't help crying out in front of everyone. But as I suspected, no one came forward to confront me.

6. Not once but a thousand times have I wished to dwell forever on Thin Mountain, even at the price of my mental balance. Even at the cost of my miserable life. No happiness except on those peaks!

7. One morning I awoke and the pain in my head was worse than ever. I had to cover my eyes, the light coming

through my window was so bright. Only the thought of Thin Mountain brought me any relief.

8. There is no secret, I now realize, concerning the existence of Thin Mountain. It seems everyone has known about it all along. I hear them discussing it everywhere. Thin Mountain, yes. Thin Mountain, certainly.

9. On Thin Mountain no one talks about Thin Mountain.

10. The train will be here soon.

Ten Steps To Thin Mountain (1989 Crypt Of Cthulhu Version)

First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu #68*, 1989.

1. One day I saw it on a very old map: Thin Mountain. No elevation was noted. In my mind vague images began to form. I set the map aside and closed my eyes. Then there was a sudden commotion, the kind that may start up anyplace, whether on a train rocking along on its tracks or just an old bench somewhere. A group of people ran by, waving their arms and making odd noises. What was it that suddenly made me reach for the old map, only to find it was gone? And I just sat there wondering what things were really like on Thin Mountain.

2. No one knows all the legends inspired by Thin Mountain, but here are a few I've recently picked up: that the air up there will turn you into a raving visionary in a matter of hours, that after a few days you experience strange yearnings that are impossible to fulfill, that long-time residents become immortal and after death walk the woods as skeletons. What can you expect from hearsay? But one thing is certain among these conjectures: no one wants to give Thin Mountain a chance.

3. Only one way to Thin Mountain: absolute madness. By this I mean to put forth no clever insight. To be at *eye level* with the world clearly leads straight to nowhere; on the

other hand, once your gaze slips off the horizontal, everything else goes with it. That is to say, no one can any longer vouch for your sanity. You have become... wayward. A grinning dwarf beckons you from the ledge of a tall building, gargoyles perched on cathedrals angle their snouts in a certain direction. And before you know it you're lying around on Thin Mountain!

4. Not all that I have discovered about Thin Mountain is pleasant. Despite a great deal of picturesque scenery—floating strands of mist, narrow trees, fabulous fingerlike peaks—this region contains more than a few perils. One of them is a solitude fit only for fanatics of exile, their eyes always draining the distances. Another is a wind which seems to be composed of countless tiny voices, the chattering populus of an invisible universe. The half-lit days and the sorcery of its nights, moments in which nothing moves and others in which everything does. But what else would you expect from a place called Thin Mountain?

5. Once I heard the words “Thin Mountain” spoken in a crowd. Did I say that I saw who said it? I did not. It could have been anyone standing along the platform, waiting for the train to arrive. The same day someone threw himself under the train. He was cut in half... but what a happy expression was plastered on the face of that corpse. “Thin Mountain!” I couldn't help crying out in front of everyone. But as I suspected, no one came forward to confront me.

6. Not once but a thousand times I wished to dwell forever on Thin Mountain, even at a price of my life or my sanity. No happiness except on those peaks!

7. One morning I awoke with great difficulty, and the pain, the noise was worse than ever. All day the pain, the

noise. All day Thin Mountain.

8. Nothing secret, I now realize, concerning the existence of Thin Mountain. It seems everyone has known about it all along. I hear them discussing it everywhere. Oh, Thin Mountain, yes, Thin Mountain, certainly.

9. On Thin Mountain, no one talks about Thin Mountain.

10. The train will be here soon.

The Master's Eyes Shining with Secrets (2011 Noctuary Version)

First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu #68*, 1989 as 'Transcendent Horror', part of *Studies In Horror*

Those bells ringing on the mist-covered mountain signify that the Master of the Temple is dead. The fact of the matter is that the monks there finally killed him.

It seems that a few years ago the Master of the Temple began to exhibit some odd and very unpleasant forms of behavior. He apparently lost all sense of earthly decorum, even losing control over his own body. At one point an extra head sprouted from the side of the Master's neck, and this ugly little thing started to issue all sorts of commands and instructions to the monks which only their lofty sense of decency and order prevented them from carrying out. Eventually the Master of the Temple was confined to a small room in an isolated part of the monastery. There, this once wise and beloved teacher was looked after like an animal. For several years the monks put up with the noises he made, the diverse shapes he took. Finally, they killed him.

It is whispered among students of enlightenment that one may achieve a state of being in which enlightenment itself loses all meaning, with the consequence that one thereby becomes subject to all manner of strange destinies.

And the monks? After the assassination they scattered in all directions. Some hid out in other monasteries, while others went back to live among the everyday inhabitants of this earth. But it was not as if they could escape their past by fleeing it, no more than they could rid themselves of their old master by killing him.

For even after the death of his material self, the Master of the Temple sought out those who were once under his guidance; and upon these unhappy disciples he bestowed, somewhat insistently, his terrible illumination.

The Master's Eyes Shining with Secrets (1994 Noctuary Version)

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Transcendent Horror (1989 Crypt Of Cthulhu Version)

First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu #68*, 1989 as part of 'Studies In Horror'.

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It seems that a few years ago the Master of the Temple began to exhibit some odd and very unpleasant forms of behaviour. He apparently lost all sense of earthly decorum, even losing control over his own body. Once an extra head sprouted from the side of the Master's neck, and this ugly little thing started to issue all sorts of commands and instructions to the monks which only their lofty sense of decency and order prevented them from carrying out. Eventually the Master of the Temple was confined to a small room in an isolated part of the monastery. There, this once wise and beloved teacher was looked after like an animal. For several years the monks put up with the noises he made, the diverse shapes he took. Finally, they killed him.

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For even after the death of his material self, the Master of the Temple sought out those who were once under his guidance; and upon these unhappy students he now bestowed, somewhat insistently, his terrible illumination.

The Inquisitor (2011 Noctuary Version)

First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu #68*, 1989 as 'Gothic Horror', part of *Studies In Horror*, then Noctuary, 1994 as Salvation By Doom

The room in the tower seemed to have closed in upon him while he slept, so he measured it off again and found its dimensions to be unchanged. His mind still uneasy, he measured it a second time, and then a third, pacing between the walls of the room in the tower. "I am measuring my own coffin," he whispered to himself while staring intently at the splotched stones of the floor.

Once more he examined every corner of his bare cell. Then he wandered over to a low door and, laying his cheek against the heavy, splintered wood, he squinted through the tiny openings in the iron grill, surveying the circular corridor of the tower. First he gazed in one direction and then, shifting over to the opposite side of the grill, in the other. Both directions offered the same view: cell door after cell door, each with an armed guard beside it, each progressively shrinking in the circular perspective of the corridor. It was the uppermost level of the castle's highest tower, a quiet place when all the prisoners were at rest. Then a tight-lipped moan broke the silence, waking him a second time from a second sleep. Again he measured off the dimensions of his cell, examining every corner, and surveyed the circular corridor through the tiny openings of the iron grill.

Yearning for diversity he wandered over to the arch-shaped window of his prison cell. This aperture, the only means of escape aside from the low door, was constructed to include four pairs of sharp metal spikes: two pairs projected from its right and left sides and two closed in from its top and bottom. Together these four pairs of metal spikes formed a cross whose parts did not quite join together. Notwithstanding these pointed impediments, there remained a perilous descent groundward. No means for securing either grip or foothold crucial for such a climb appeared on the castle's outer walls, nor was there any possibility of concealment, even during the darkest of the castle's watchful nights. In the day, the arch-shaped window offered a view of sunlit mountains, blue sky, and rustling forest, a seemingly endless tableau of nature which in other circumstances might have been considered sublime. In the present circumstances, the mountains and forest, even the sky, seemed thick with human enemies and natural obstacles, making the mere dream of escape impossible. Still, he often did dream of accomplishing this feat.

Someone was now shaking him, and he awoke. It was the dead of night. Outside the window a bright crescent moon was fixed in the blackness. Within the room were two guards and a hooded figure holding a lamp. One of the guards pinned the dreamer to the floor, while the other reached underneath his ragged shirt, relieving him of a hidden weapon he had recently formed out of a fragment from one of the stone walls in the tower room. “Don't worry,” the guard said, “we've been watching you.” Then the hooded figure waved the lamp toward the doorway and the prisoner was

carried out, his feet dragging over the dark stones of the floor.

From the room in the tower they descended—by means of countless stone staircases and long, torchlit passages—to the deepest part of the castle far underground. This area was a complex of vast chambers, each outfitted from its cold, earthen floor to its lofty, almost indiscernible ceiling with an incredible system of machinery. In addition to the incessant echoes of an icy seepage dripping from above, the only other distinguishable sound was the creaking of this formidable array of devices, with the refrain now and then of an open-mouthed groan.

His body was put in harness and hoisted so that the tips of his toes barely grazed the floor. The hooded figure, through a sequence of signals, directed the proceedings. During a lull in his agony, the prisoner once again tried to explain to his persecutors their error—that he was guilty of nothing.

"Are you certain of that?" asked the hooded figure, speaking in an almost kindly tone of voice. "You are not even certain of the size of your cell, you measure it so many times each night. Were I in your place I might do the same. Nothing is certain, my son. Tomorrow I may be in your place. Judgment is all that matters. Without it we would go mad and slaughter would reign until no one was left to say this is true and that is not. Embrace your judgment. By doing so, you save yourself. It is the only way to keep steady in this world where nothing is certain. Do you understand what I am saying? *You* are the fortunate one."

At these words a look of profound confusion appeared on the prisoner's face. It was as if an interrogation were being

conducted within him. And although no new manipulations had been employed, his entire body became grotesquely arched in agony as he emitted a single unbroken scream before collapsing into unconsciousness.

"Waken him," ordered the hooded figure.

They tried, but his body still hung motionless from the ropes, hunched and twisting in its harness. He had already been revived for the last time, and his measurements would no longer be necessary. All was sane and certain now that he was lost in a formless prison of nothingness.

Salvation by Doom (1994 Noctuary Version)

First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu #68*, 1989 as 'Gothic Horror', part of *Studies In Horror*.

The room in the tower seemed to have closed in upon him while he slept, so he measured it off again and found its dimensions to be unchanged. His mind still uneasy, he measured it a second time, and then a third. Then he awoke and measured it off a fourth time, pacing between the walls of the room in the tower. "I am measuring my own coffin," he whispered to himself while staring intently at the splotched stones of the floor.

Once again he examined every corner of his bare cell. Then he wandered over to the low, handleless door and, laying his cheek against the heavy, splintered wood, he squinted through the tiny openings in the iron grill, surveying the circular corridor of the tower. First he gazed in one direction and then, shifting over to the opposite side of the grill, in the other. Both directions offered the same view: cell door after cell door, each with an armed guard beside it, each progressively shrinking in the circular perspective of the corridor. It was the uppermost level of the castle's highest tower, a quiet place when all the prisoners were at rest. Then a tight-lipped moan broke the silence, waking him a second time from a second sleep. He measured off the dimensions of his cell once more, examining every corner,

then surveyed the circular corridor through the tiny openings of the iron grill.

Once again he wandered over to the arch-shaped window of his prison cell. This aperture, the only means of escape aside from the low door, was constructed to include four pairs of sharp metal spikes: two pairs projecting from the right and left sides, two closing in from its top and bottom, and all forming a kind of cross whose parts did not quite join together. But these pointed impediments notwithstanding, there remained a perilous descent groundward. No means for securing either grip or foothold crucial for such a climb were offered by the castle's outer walls, nor was there any possibility of concealment, even during the darkest of the castle's watchful nights. Beyond the window was a view of sunlit mountains, blue sky, and rustling forest, a seemingly endless tableau of nature which in other circumstances might have been considered sublime. In the present circumstances the mountains and forests, perhaps the sky itself, seemed thick with human enemies and natural obstacles, making the mere dream of escape an impossibility.

Someone was now shaking him, and he awoke. It was the dead of night. Outside the window a bright crescent moon was fixed in the blackness. Within the room were two guards and a hooded figure holding a lamp. One of the guards pinned the dreamer to the floor, while the other reached underneath his ragged shirt, relieving him of a hidden weapon he had recently formed out of a fragment from one of the stone walls in the tower room. “Don't worry,” the guard said, “we've been watching you.” Then the hooded figure waved the lamp toward the doorway and the prisoner was

carried out, his feet dragging over the dark stones of the floor.

From the room in the tower they descended—by means of countless stone staircases and long, torchlit passages—to the deepest part of the castle far underground. This area was a complex of vast chambers, each outfitted from its cold, earthen floor to its lofty, almost indiscernible ceiling with a formidable array of devices. In addition to the incessant echoes of an icy seepage dripping from above, the only other distinguishable sound was the creaking of this incredible system of machinery, with the refrain now and then of an open-mouthed groan.

His body was put in harness and hoisted so that the tips of his toes barely grazed the floor. The hooded figure, through a sequence of signals, directed the proceedings. During a lull in his agony, the prisoner once again tried to explain to his persecutors their error—that he was not who they thought he was, that he was suffering another man's punishment.

“Are you certain of that?” asked the hooded figure, speaking in an almost kindly tone of voice which he had never used before.

At these words a look of profound confusion appeared on the prisoner's face, one quite distinct from previous expressions of mere physical torment. And although no new manipulations had been employed, his entire body became grotesquely arched in agony as he emitted a single unbroken scream before collapsing into unconsciousness.

“Waken him,” ordered the hooded figure.

They tried, but his body still hung motionless from the ropes, hunched and twisting in its harness. He had already

been revived for the last time, and his dreams of measurements and precise dimensions would no longer be disturbed, lost as they now were in a formless nonsense of nothingness.

Gothic Horror (1989 Crypt Of Cthulhu Version)

First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu #68*, 1989 as part of 'Studies In Horror'.

The room in the tower seemed to have closed in upon him while he slept, so he measured it off again and found its dimensions to be unchanged. His mind still uneasy, he measured it a second time, and then a third. Then he awoke and measured it off a fourth time, pacing between the walls of the room in the tower. "I am measuring my own coffin," he whispered to himself while staring intently at the splotched stones of the floor.

Once again he examined every bare corner of his cell. Then he wandered over to the low, handleless door—shaped like an arch—and, laying his cheek against the heavy, splintered wood, he squinted through the tiny openings in the iron grill, surveying the circular corridor of the tower. First he gazed in one direction and then, shifting over to the opposite side of the grill, in the other. Both directions offered the same view: cell door after cell door, each with an armed guard beside it, each progressively shrinking in the circular perspective of the corridor. It was the uppermost level of the castle's highest tower, a quiet place when all the prisoners were at rest. Then a tight-lipped moan broke the silence, waking him a second time from a second sleep. He measured off the dimensions of his cell once more, examin-

ing every bare corner, then surveyed the circular corridor through the tiny openings of the iron grill.

Once again he wandered over to the arch-shaped window of his prison cell. This aperture, the only means of escape aside from the low door, was constructed to include four pairs of sharp metal spikes: two pairs projecting from the right and left sides, two closing in from its top and bottom, and all forming a kind of cross whose parts did not quite join together. But these pointed impediments notwithstanding, there remained a perilous descent groundward. No means for securing either grip or foothold crucial for such a climb were offered by the castle's outer walls, nor was there any possibility of concealment, even, one might say especially, during the darkest of the castle's watchful nights. Beyond the window was a loftly view of sunlit mountains, blue sky, rustling forest, a seemingly endless tableau of nature which in other circumstances might have been considered sublime. In the present circumstances the mountains and forests, perhaps the sky itself, seemed populated with human enemies and natural obstacles which made the mere dream of escape an impossibility.

Someone was now shaking him, and he awoke. It was the dead of night. Outside the window a bright crescent moon was fixed in the blackness. Within the room were two guards and a hooded figure holding a lamp. One of the guards pinned the dreamer to the floor, while the other reached underneath his ragged shirt, relieving him of a hidden weapon he had recently formed out of a fragment from one of the stone walls in the tower room. “Don't worry,” the guard said, “we've been watching you.” Then the hooded figure waved the lamp toward the doorway and the prisoner was

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“Are you certain of that?” asked the hooded figure, speaking in an almost kindly tone of voice which he had never used before.

At these words a look of profound confusion appeared on the prisoner's face, one quite distinct from previous expressions of mere physical torment. And although no new manipulations had been employed, his entire body became grotesquely arched in agony as he emitted a single unbroken scream before collapsing into unconsciousness.

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The Unfamiliar (2011 Noctuary Version)

First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu #68*, 1989 as 'Exotic Horror', a section of *Studies In Horror*

He had lost his guide—or else had been abandoned by this seething, wiry native of the city—and now he was wandering through strange streets alone. The experience was not entirely an unwelcome one. From the first instant he became aware of the separation, things became more... interesting. Perhaps this transformation had begun even in the moments preceding a full awareness of his situation. The narrow entranceway of a certain street or the shadowed spire of an exotic structure appeared as mildly menacing to the prophetic edges of his vision, pleasantly threatening. Now his eyes were filled with the sight of an infinitely more ominous scene, and a truly foreign one.

It was near sundown and all the higher architectures—the oddly curving roofs, the almost tilting peaks—were turned into anonymous forms with razor-sharp outlines by the low brilliance in the west. And these angular monuments, blocking the sun, covered the streets below with a thick layer of shadows, so that even though a radiant blue sky continued to burn above, down here it was already evening.

The torpid confusion of the streets, the crudely musical clatter of alien sounds, became far more mysterious without the daylight and without his guide. It was as if the city had

annexed the shadows and expanded under the cover of darkness, as if it were celebrating incredible things there, setting up all sorts of fabulous attractions. Golden lights began to fill windows and to fall against the crumbling mortar of old walls.

His attention was now drawn to a low building at the end of the street, and, avoiding any thought which might diminish his sense of freedom, he entered its lamplit doorway.

The place was one of indefinite character. Stepping inside, he received a not unwelcoming glance from a man who was adjusting some objects on a shelf across the room, and who turned briefly to look over his shoulder at the foreign visitor. At first this man, who must have been the proprietor, was barely noticeable, for the color and texture of his attire somehow caused him to blend, chameleon-like, into the surrounding decor. The man became apparent only after showing his face, but after he turned away he retreated back into the anonymity from which he had been momentarily summoned by the intrusion of a customer. Otherwise there was no one else in the shop, and, left unbothered by its invisible proprietor, he browsed freely among the shelves.

What merchandise they held. True curiosities in a thousand twisting shapes peeped up from the lower shelves, met one's gaze at eye level, and leered down from dim and dusty heights. Some of them, particularly the very small ones, but also the very largest ones crouched in corners, could not be linked to anything he had ever seen. They might have been trinkets for strange gods, toys for monsters.

His sense of freedom intensified. Now he was nearly overcome with the feeling that something unheard of could very possibly enter his life, something which otherwise might

have passed him by. His sensation was one of fear, but fear that was charged with the blackest passion. He now felt himself as the victim of some vast conspiracy that involved the remotest quarters of the cosmos, countless plots all converging upon him. Hidden portents were everywhere and his head was now spinning: first with vague images and possibilities, then with… darkness.

What place he later occupied is impossible to say. Underground, perhaps, beneath the shop with the peculiar merchandise. Thenceforward it was always dark, except on those occasions when his keepers would come down and shine a light across the full length of his monstrous form. (*The victim of a horrible magic*, the guide would whisper.) But the shining light never disturbed his dreams, since his present shape was equipped with nothing that functioned as eyes.

Afterward money would be collected from the visiting spectators, who were sworn to secrecy before they were allowed to witness this marvel. Still later they would be assassinated to insure the inviolable condition of their vow. But how much more fortunate were they, meeting their deaths with a fresh sense of that exotic wonder which they had traveled so far to experience, than he, for whom all distances and alien charm had long ago ceased to exist in the cramped and nameless incarceration in which he had found a horrible home.

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It was near sundown and all the higher architectures—the oddly curving roofs, the almost tilting peaks—were turned into anonymous forms with razor-sharp outlines by the low brilliance in the west. And these angular monuments, blocking the sun, covered the streets below with a thick layer of shadows, so that even though a radiant blue sky continued to burn above, down here it was already evening.

The torpid confusion of the streets, the crudely musical clatter of alien sounds, became far more mysterious without the daylight and without his guide. It was as if the city had

annexed the shadows and expanded under the cover of darkness, as if it were celebrating incredible things there, setting up all sorts of fabulous attractions. Golden lights began to fill windows and to fall against the crumbling mortar of old walls.

His attention was now drawn to a low building at the end of the street, and, avoiding any thought which might diminish his sense of freedom, he entered its lamplit doorway.

The place was one of indefinite character. Stepping inside, he received a not unwelcoming glance from a man who was adjusting some objects on a shelf across the room, and who turned briefly to look over his shoulder at the foreign visitor. At first this man, who must have been the proprietor, was barely noticeable, for the color and texture of his attire somehow caused him to blend, chameleon-like, into the surrounding decor. The man became apparent only after showing his face, but after he turned away he retreated back into the anonymity from which he had been momentarily summoned by the intrusion of a customer. Otherwise there was no one else in the shop, and, left unbothered by its invisible proprietor, he browsed freely among the shelves.

What merchandise they held. True curiosities in a thousand twisting shapes were huddled together on the lower shelves, met one's gaze at eye level, and leered down from dim and dusty heights. Some of them, particularly the very small ones, but also the very largest ones crouched in corners, could not be linked to anything he had ever seen. They might have been trinkets for strange gods, toys for monsters. His sense of freedom intensified. Now he was nearly overcome with the feeling that something unheard of could very possibly enter his life, something which other-

wise might have passed him by. His sensation was one of fear, but fear that was charged with the blackest passion. He now felt himself as the victim of some vast conspiracy that involved the remotest quarters of the cosmos, countless plots all converging upon him. Hidden portents were everywhere and his head was now spinning: first with vague images and possibilities, then with… darkness.

What place he later occupied is impossible to say. Underground, perhaps, beneath the shop with the peculiar merchandise. Thenceforward it was always dark, except on those occasions when his keepers would come down and shine a light across the full length of his monstrous form. (The victim of a horrible magic, the guide would whisper.) But the shining light never disturbed his dreams, since his present shape was equipped with nothing that functioned as eyes.

Afterward money would be collected from the visiting spectators, who were sworn to secrecy before they were allowed to witness this marvel. Still later they would be assassinated to insure the inviolable condition of their vow. But how much more fortunate were they, meeting their deaths with a fresh sense of that exotic wonder which they had travelled so far to experience, than he, for whom all distances and alien charm had long ago ceased to exist in the cramped and nameless incarceration in which he had found a horrible home.

Exotic Horror (1989 Crypt Of Cthulhu Version)

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The torpid confusion of the streets, the crudely musical clatter of alien sounds, became far more mysterious without

the daylight and without his guide. It was as if the city had annexed the shadows and expanded under the cover of darkness, as if it were celebrating incredible things there, all sorts of fabulous attractions. Golden lights began to fill windows and to fall against the crumbling mortar of old walls.

His attention was now drawn to a low building at the end of the street, and, avoiding any thought which might diminish his sense of freedom, he entered its lamplit doorway.

The place was one of indefinite character and intention. Stepping inside, he received a not unwelcoming glance from a man who was adjusting some objects on a shelf across the room, and who turned briefly to look over his shoulder at the foreign visitor. At first this man, who must have been the proprietor, was barely noticeable, for the color and texture of his attire somehow caused him to blend, chameleon-like, into the surrounding decor. The man became apparent only after showing his face, but after he turned away he retreated back into the anonymity from which he had been momentarily summoned by the intrusion of a customer. Otherwise there was no one else in the shop, and, left unbothered by its invisible proprietor, he browsed freely among the shelves.

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Afterward money would be collected from the visiting spectators, who were sworn to secrecy before they were allowed to witness this marvel. Still later they would be assassinated to insure the inviolable condition of their vow. But how much more fortunate were they, meeting their deaths with a fresh sense of that exotic wonder which they had travelled so far to experience, than he, for whom all distances and alien charm had long ago ceased to exist in the cramped and nameless incarceration in which he had found a horrible home.

The Spectral Estate (2011 Noctuary Version)

First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu #68*, 1989 as 'Spectral Horror', a section of *Studies In Horror*.

One may be alone in the house and yet not alone.

There are so many rooms, so many galleries and mysteries, so many places where a peculiar quiet resounds with secrets. Every object and surface of the house seems darkly vibrant, a medium for distant agitations which are felt but not always seen or heard: dusty chandeliers send a stirring through the air above, walls ripple within patterns of raised filigree, grimy portraits shudder inside their gilded frames. And even if the light throughout much of the house has grown stale and become a sepia haze, it nevertheless remains a haze in ferment, a fidgeting aura that envelops this museum of tremulous antiquities.

Thus, one may be alone in the house and yet not alone, especially when it is a remote edifice which clings to the very edge of the land and hovers above a frigid ocean. Through an upper window is a view of coastal earth falling away into gray, heaving waters. The lower windows of the house all look into the rustling depths of a garden long overgrown and sprouting in prolific tangles. A narrow path leads through this chaotic luxuriance, ending at the border of a dense wood which is aroused to life by a mild but perpetual wind. Ocean, garden, and wooded surroundings, all possessed by a visible turbulence which echoes the unseen tremors within

the house itself. And when night masks the movements of this landscape, it is the stars that shiver around a livid, palpitant moon.

Yet one may not believe there is an exchange of influence between the house and the world around it. And still there is a presence that pervades each as though there were no walls to divide them.

From the moment one arrives at such a house there seems to be something moving in the background of its scenes, a hidden company whose nature is unknown. No true peace can establish itself in these rooms, however long they have remained alone with their own emptiness, abandoned to lie dormant and dreamless. Throughout the most innocent mornings and unclouded afternoons there endures a kind of restless pulling at appearances, an awkward or expert fussing with the façade of objects. In the night a tide of shadows invades the house, submerging its rooms in a darkness which allows a greater freedom to these fitful maneuverings.

And perhaps there is a certain room toward the very summit of the house, a room where one may sense how deeply the house has penetrated into a far greater estate: a landscape which is without boundaries either above or below, an infinite architecture whose interior is as tortuous and vast as its exterior. The room is long and large and features a row of double doors along the full length of one wall, doors which lead out to a narrow terrace overlooking the ocean and staring straight into the sky. And each door is composed of a double row of windowpanes, opening the room to the images of the expansive world outside it and allowing the least possible division between them.

There are no working light fixtures in this room, so that it necessarily shares in the luminous moods of the day or night beyond the windows. Discovering this chamber on a certain overcast afternoon, one settles into an apartment that itself is hung with clouds and enveloped by dull twilight for endless hours. And yet the room appears to gain all the depth that the day has lost; whereas the sky has been foreshortened by a low ceiling of soft gray clouds, the dim corners and shaded furnishings reach into immense realms, great wells and hollows beyond vision. Certainly the echoes one hears must be resonating in places outside that room, which muffles one's movements with its thick and densely figured carpet; its plump, upholstered chairs; and its maze of tables, cases, and cabinets in dark, weighty wood.

For in this constricted setting, echoes emerge which only a void of supernatural dimensions could create. Yet at first they may sound like the reverberant groaning of those clouds in which a storm slumbers. And then they may seem to mimic the hissing of the ocean as it swirls about the broken land below. Slowly, however, the echoes distinguish themselves from these natural sounds and attain their own voice—a voice that carries across incredible distances, a voice whose words come to lose their stratum of sense, a voice that is dissolving into sighs and sobs and chattering insanity. Every niche, every pattern, every shadow of the room is eloquent with this voice. And one's attention may be distracted by this strange soliloquy, this uncanny music. Thus, one may not notice, as afternoon approaches nightfall, that something else is present in the room, something which has been secreted out of sight and waits to rise up in the shape of a revelation, to rise up like a cry in one's own throat.

Such phenomena may be quite severe in their effects, leaving their witness in a perilous orientation between two worlds, one of which is imposing its madness and its mysteries on the other. We feel the proximity of a darkness beyond earthly reason, of a cryptic land of dreams whose shadows mingle with our own, breathing their intense life into the airless world of the mundane. For a time we are content to reside within that metaphysical twilight and delve deep into its hues. Long exasperated by questions without answers, by answers without consequences, by truths which change nothing, we learn to become intoxicated by the mood of mystery itself, by the odor of the unknown. We are entranced by the subtle scents and wavering reflections of the unimaginable.

In the beginning it is not our intention to seek order within madness or to give a name to certain mysteries. We are not concerned with creating a system out of the strangeness of that house. What we seek—in all its primitive purity—is the company of the spectral. But ultimately, as if possessed by some fatal instinct, we succumb to the spirit of intrigue and attempt to find a drab focus for the amorphous glories we have inherited.

We are like the man who, by some legacy of fate, has come to stay in another old house, one very much like our own. After passing a short time within the cavernous and elaborate solitude of the place, he becomes a spectator to strange sights and sounds. He then begins to doubt his sanity, and at last flees the advancing shadows of the house for the bright shelter of a nearby town. There, amid the good society of the local citizens, he learns the full history of the house. (It seems that long ago some tragedy occurred, an ir-

reparable melodrama that has continued to be staged many years after the deaths of the actors involved.) Others who have lived in the house have witnessed the same eerie events, and its most recent guest is greatly relieved by this knowledge. Faith in his mental soundness has been triumphantly restored: it is the house itself which is mad.

But this man need not have been so comforted. If the spectral drama could be traced to definite origins, and others have been audience to it, this is not to prove that all testimony regarding the house is unmarked by madness. Rather, it suggests a greater derangement, a conspiracy of unreason implicating a plurality of lunatics, a delirium that encompasses past and present, houses and minds, the claustrophobic cellars of the soul and the endless spaces outside it.

For we are the specters of a madness that surpasses ourselves and hides in mystery. And though we search for sense throughout endless rooms, all we may find is a voice whispering from a mirror in a house that belongs to no one.

The Spectral Estate (1994 Noctuary Version)

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So one cannot feel alone in such a house, especially when it is a remote edifice which clings to the very edge of the land and hovers above a frigid ocean. Through an upper window is a view of coastal earth falling away into gray, heaving waters. The lower windows of the house all look into the rustling depths of a garden long overgrown and sprouting in prolific tangles. A narrow path leads through this chaotic luxuriance, ending at the border of a dense wood which is aroused to life by a mild but perpetual wind. Ocean, garden, learn to become intoxicated by the mood of mystery itself,

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Spectral Horror (1989 Crypt Of Cthulhu Version)

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One may be alone in the house and yet not alone.

There are so many rooms, so many galleries and corridors, all laid out level upon level, a strange succession of mysteries, so many places where a peculiar quiet resounds with secrets. Every object and surface of the house seems darkly vibrant, a medium for distant agitations which are felt but not always seen or heard: dusty chandeliers send a stirring through the air above, walls ripple within patterns of raised filigree, grimy portraits shudder inside their gilded frames. And even if the light throughout much of the house has grown stale and become a sepia haze, it nevertheless remains a haze in ferment, a fidgeting aura that envelops this museum of tremulous antiquities.

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woods—surroundings possessed by a visible turbulence which echoes the unseen tremors within the house itself. And when the night masks the movements of this landscape, it is the stars that shiver around a livid, palpitant mood.

Yet one may not believe there is an exchange of influence between the house and the world around it. And still there is a presence that pervades as though there were no walls to divide them.

From the moment on arrives at such a house there seems to be something moving in the background of its scenes, a hidden company whose nature is unknown. No true peace can establish itself in these rooms, however long they have remained alone with their own emptiness, abandoned to lie dormant and dreamless. Throughout the most innocent mornings and unclouded afternoons there endures a kind of restless pulling at appearances, an awkward or expert fussing with the façade of objects. In the night a tide of shadows invades the house, submerging its rooms in a greater darkness which allows a greater freedom to these fitful maneuverings.

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secreted out of sight and waits to rise up in the shape of a revelation, to rise up like a cry in one's own throat.

Such phenomena may be quite severe in their effects, leaving their witness in a perilous orientation between two worlds, one of which is imposing its madness and its mysteries on the other. We feel the proximity of a great darkness beyond earthly reason, of a cryptic land of dreams whose shadows mingle with our own, breathing their intense life into the airless world of the mundane. For a time we are content to reside within that metaphysical twilight and delve deep into its hues. Long exasperated by questions without answers, by answers without consequences, by truths which change nothing, we learn to become intoxicated by the mood of mystery itself, by the odor of the unknown. We are entranced by the subtle scents and wavering reflections of the unimaginable.

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ciety of the local citizens, he learns the full history of the house. (It seems that long ago some tragedy occurred, an irreparable melodrama that has continued to be staged many years after the deaths of the actors involved.) Others who have lived in the house have witness the same eerie events, and its most recent guest is greatly relieved by this knowledge. Faith in his mental soundness has been triumphantly restored: it is the house itself which is mad.

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For we are the specters of a madness that surpasses ourselves and hides in mystery. And though we search for sense throughout endless rooms, all we may find is a voice whispering from a mirror in a house that belongs to no one.

New Faces in the City (2011 Noctuary Version)

First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu #68*, 1989 as 'Unreal Horror', a section of *Studies In Horror*.

One must speak of the impostor city.

There is never a design to arrive in this place. One's destination is always elsewhere. Only as the journey's end approaches, perhaps too soon or by means of a strange route, may suspicions arise. Then everything requires a doubting gaze.

Yet everything also seems above sensible question. On the occasion that one has set out for a great metropolis, here the very site of anticipation is found. Its monuments spread wondrously across bright skies, and many-colored gardens spread out in the warmth of the day.

But here, one soon observes, nightfall is out of pace. It may be premature, an early darkness unfamiliar in its quality and duration. Throughout these smothering hours there may also be sounds that press strangely upon the fringes of sleep.

The following day one may awake to a different season than the night before had promised. And all the towers of the great metropolis seem hidden behind a mist that draws a pale curtain across the sky. Yet in fact the towers are no longer there.

Through the mist, which hovers thick and stagnant, the city projects the features of its true face. Drab, crumpled

buildings appear along streets which twist without pattern like cracks between the pieces of a puzzle. Dark houses bulge; neither stone nor wood, their surface might be of decaying flesh, peeling away at the slightest touch.

Some of these structures are mere façades propped up by a few rotting boards. Others falsify their interiors with crude scenes painted where windows should be. And where a true window appears there is likely to be an arm hanging out of it, a stuffed and dangling appendage with a hand whose fingers are too many or too few.

Here and there scraps of debris hop about with no wind to guide them. These are the only things that seem to move in these streets, though there is a constant scraping noise that follows one's steps. If one pauses for a moment to look into a narrow space between buildings, something may be seen dragging itself along the ground, or perhaps it has already laid itself across the street, obstructing the way that leads out of the city. This figure is only that of a dead-eyed dummy, and when someone tries to step over the thing, its mouth suddenly drops open. At the time this is the best the city can do—a sham of menace that has no life and deceives no one.

Only later—when in disgust one has left behind this place of feeble impostures—will the true menace make itself known. And it begins when well-known surroundings inspire, on occasion, moments of doubt. Then places must verify themselves, objects are asked to prove their solidity, a searching hand makes inquiries upon the surface of a window.

Afterward there are intense seizures of suspicion that will not abate. Everything seems to be on the verge of dis-

closing its unreality and drifting off into shadows. And shadows appear to slide down rooftops, trickle down walls and into the streets like black rain. Your own eyes stare absently in the mirror; your mouth drops open. But it will not close.

Thus, one must speak of the impostor city—and of the perils of bearing it back from a journey and being absorbed as one of its citizens.

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Yet everything also seems above sensible question. On the occasion that one has set out for a great metropolis, here the very site of anticipation is found. Its monuments spread wondrously across bright skies, despite an unseasonable mist which may obscure its earthward landmarks.

But here, one soon observes, nightfall is out of pace. Perhaps it will occur unexpectedly early, bringing a darkness of an unfamiliar quality and duration. Throughout these smothering hours there may be sounds that press strangely upon the fringes of sleep.

The following day belongs to a dim season. And all the towers of the great metropolis have withered in a mist which now lies upon low buildings and has drawn a pale curtain across the sky.

Through the mist, which hovers thick and stagnant, the city projects the features of its true face. Drab, crumpled buildings appear along streets which twist without pattern like cracks between the pieces of a puzzle. Dark houses

bulge; neither stone nor wood, their surface might be of decaying flesh, breaking away at the slightest touch.

Some of these structures are mere façades propped up by a void. Others falsify their interiors with crude scenes painted where windows should be. And where a true window appears there is likely to be an arm hanging out of it, a stuffed and dangling arm with a hand whose fingers are too many or too few.

Here and there scraps of debris hop about with no wind to guide them. These are the only things that seem to move in these streets, though there is a constant scraping noise that follows one's steps. If one pauses for a moment to look into a narrow space between buildings, something may be seen dragging itself along the ground, or perhaps it has already laid itself across the street, obstructing the way that leads out of the city. This figure is only that of a dead-eyed dummy; yet, when someone tries to step over the thing, its mouth suddenly drops open. At the time this is the best the city can do—a sham of menace that has no life and deceives no one.

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Afterward there are intense seizures of suspicion that will not abate. Everything seems to be on the verge of disclosing its unreality and drifting off into the shadows. And the shadows themselves collapse and slide down rooftops,

trickle down walls and into the streets like black rain. One's own eyes stare absently in the mirror; one's mouth drops open in horror.

Unreal Horror (1989 Crypt Of Cthulhu Version)

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One must speak of the impostor city.

There is never a design to arrive in this place. Destination is always elsewhere. Only when the end of one's journey is reached too soon, or by means of a strange route, may suspicions arise. Then everything requires a doubting gaze.

Yet everything also seems above sensible question. On the occasion that one has set out for a great metropolis, here the very site of anticipation is found. Its monuments spread wondrously across bright skies, despite an unseasonable mist which may obscure its earthward landmarks.

But here, one soon observes, nightfall is out of pace. Perhaps it will occur unexpectedly early, bringing a darkness of an unfamiliar quality and duration. Throughout these smothering hours there may be sounds that press strangely upon the fringes of sleep.

The following day belongs forever to a dim season. And all the towers of the great metropolis have withered in a mist which now lies upon low buildings and has drawn a pale curtain across the sky.

Through the mist, which hovers thick and stagnant, the city projects the features of its true face. Drab, crumpled buildings appear along streets which twist without pattern

like cracks between the pieces of a puzzle. Dark houses bulge; neither stone nor wood, their surface might be of decaying flesh, breaking away at the slightest touch.

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The Demon Man (2011 Noctuary Version)

First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu #68*, 1989 as 'Demonic Horror', a section of *Studies In Horror*.

Even in the darkness they seemed to linger, half-tone freaks parading translucent until they faded with the dawn. Eyes open or closed, the lamp glowing or not, he felt that they were threatening to pass over the threshold and manifest themselves on the other side of sleep. Their faces would begin to darken the air, and then dissolve. The light in his room momentarily molded itself into fantastic limbs that slipped in and out of the glare of his eyeglasses. A draft grew thick and foul, gusting briefly against his cheek.

In the morning he drifted pale from his home, another night exacted from him by disfigured masters, a little more of himself sliding into the black mirror of dreams. At first he would regain some of his losses of the previous night, but less of his own life was being returned to his possession. Their presence was now with him, an invisible mist surrounding him and distorting his senses. The streets he walked seemed to slant beneath his feet; a scene in the distance would be twisted out of all earthly shape, suggesting the remote latitudes of nightmare. Voices whispered to him from the depths of stairwells and the far corners of hallways. Somehow the raveling clouds carried a charnel odor which pursued him back to the door of his home and into his sleep.

And into the dreams he fell, helplessly skittering down slanted streets, tumbling down stairwells, caught in a mesh of moldering clouds. Then the faces began to float above him, sharp fingers reaching into his flesh. He screamed himself awake. But even in the darkness they seemed to linger.

Finally he was chased from his home and into the streets, walking ceaselessly until daybreak. He became a seeker of crowds, but the crowds thinned and abandoned him. He became a seeker of lights, but the lights grew strange and led him into desolate places. There the only illumination to be found was in the black, shining surface of wetted streets. Every house in that neighborhood was a battered, cracking vessel of darkness; every tree was perfectly still. There was not another soul to companion him, and the moon was a fool.

They were there with him. He could feel their scabby touch, though he could not see them. As long as he walked, as long as he was awake, he would not see them. But someone was pulling at his sleeve, a frail little man with eyeglasses.

It was only an elderly gentleman who wanted to be shown the way along these dim streets, to exchange a few remarks with this grateful stranger, one so eager for company on that particular evening. Finally the soft-voiced old man tipped his hat and continued slowly down the street. But he had walked only a few steps when he turned and said: “Do you like your demon dreams?”

And into the dreams he fell… and forever.

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Finally he was chased from his home and into the streets, walking ceaselessly until daybreak. He became a seeker of crowds, but the crowds thinned and abandoned him. He became a seeker of lights, but the lights grew strange and led him into desolate places.

Now the lights were reflected in the black, shining surface of wetted streets. Every house in that neighborhood was a battered, cracking vessel of darkness; every tree was perfectly still. There was not another soul to companion him, and the moon was a fool.

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And into the dreams he fell, helplessly skittering down slanted streets, tumbling down stairwells, caught in a mesh of moldering clouds. Then the faces began to float above him, sharp fingers reaching into his flesh. He screamed himself awake. But even in the darkness they seemed to linger.

Finally he was chased from his home and into the streets, walking ceaselessly until daybreak. He became a seeker of crowds, but the crowds thinned and abandoned him. He became a seeker of lights, but the lights grew strange and led him into desolate places.

And now the lights were reflected in the black, shining surface of wetted streets. Every house in that neighborhood was a battered, cracking vessel of darkness; every tree was perfect stillness. There was not another soul to companion him, and the moon was a fool.

And they were there with him. He could feel their scabby touch, though he could not see them. As long as he walked, as long as he was awake, he would not see them. But someone was pulling at his sleeve, a frail little man with eyeglasses.

It was only an elderly gentleman who wanted to be shown the way along these dim streets, to exchange a few remarks with this grateful stranger, one so eager for company on that particular evening. Finally the soft-voiced old man tipped his hat and continued slowly down the street. But he had walked only a few steps when he turned and said: “Do you like your demon dreams?”

And into the dreams he fell… and forever.

Suicide By Imagination (2011 Noctuary Version)

First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu #68*, 1989 as 'Macabre Horror', a section of *Studies In Horror*.

To others he always tried to convey the impression that he lived in a better place than he did, one a little more impressive and far less decayed. "If they could only see what things are really like here, I would die of shame."

Feeling somewhat morose, he closed his eyes and sank down into gloomy reflections. He was sitting in a plump, stuffed chair which was sprouting in several places through the worn upholstery.

"Would you like to know how it feels to be dead?" he imagined a voice asking him.

"Yes, I would," he imagined answering.

A rickety but rather proud-looking gentleman—this is how he imagined the one who spoke to him—led him past the gates of a graveyard. (They were flaking with age and squeaking in the wind, just as he always imagined they would.) The quaintly tilting headstones, the surrounding grove of vaguely stirring trees, the soft gray sky overhead, the cool air faintly fragrant with decay: "Is this how it is?" he asked hopefully. "Late afternoon in a perpetual autumn?"

"Not exactly," the gentleman answered. "Please keep watching."

The gentleman's instruction was intended ironically, for there was no longer anything to behold: no headstones, no

trees or sky, no fragrance of any kind to be sensed.

“Is this how it is, then?” he asked once more. “A body frozen in blackness, a perpetual night in winter?”

“Not precisely,” the gentleman replied. “Allow your vision to become used to the darkness.”

Then it began to appear to him, glowing with a glacial illumination, a subterranean phosphorescence. Initially, the radiant corpse he saw seemed to be in a stiffly upright position; but he had no way of calculating his angle of perspective, which may actually have been somewhere directly above the full length of the body, rather than frontally facing its height. No less than its mold-spotted clothes, the flesh of the cadaver was in gauzy tatters, lips shriveled to a powdery smudge on a pale shroud of a face, eyes dried up in the shells of their sockets, hair a mere sprinkling of dust. And now he imagined the feeling of death as one previously beyond his imagination. This feeling was simply that of an eternally prolonged itching sensation.

“Yes, of course,” he thought, “What else could it be but an incredible itching when all the fluids are gone and ragged flesh chafes in ragged clothes. How absurd. Is this, then, how it truly feels to be dead?” he asked.

But this time no voice answered him, or none that he heard. He was past all that now. Never again would he imagine such things as how it felt to be dead. And never again would he have to lie to another soul on earth.

A long time passed before anyone came to his home and saw his body, its bony fingers digging into the tattered material of a plump, stuffed armchair; its skin already crumbling and covered with the room's dust. He was found by some acquaintances who wondered what had become of

him. And as they stood for a few numbed moments around the site of his seated corpse, a few of them absent-mindedly gave their collared necks or shirt-sleeved arms a little scratch.

Along with the trauma this unexpected discovery imposed, there was the lesser shock of the dead man's run-down home, which was not at all like the more impressive residence he had described to them. What a place to live, they thought. And what a place to die, they imagined, each one of them, when—on autumn afternoons or winter nights—they recollected the thing they found in the chair, or simply reflected on the phenomenon of death itself. Occasionally these musings would be accompanied by an itch that was practically impossible to relieve, often ceasing only after they had torn away at their flesh until it bled.

Death Without End (1994 Noctuary Version)

First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu #68*, 1989 as 'Macabre Horror', a section of *Studies In Horror*.

To others he always tried to convey the impression that he lived in a better place than he actually did, one far more comfortable and far less decayed. "If they could only see what things are really like, rotting all around me."

Feeling somewhat morose, he closed his eyes and sank down into gloomy reflections. He was sitting in a plump, stuffed chair which was sprouting in several places through the worn upholstery.

"Would you like to know how it feels to be dead?" he imagined a voice asking him. "Yes, I would," he imagined answering. A rickety but rather proud-looking gentleman—this is how he imagined the voice—led him past the graveyard gates. (And they were flaking with age and squeaking in the wind, just as he always imagined they would.) The quaintly tilting headstones, the surrounding grove of vaguely stirring trees, the soft gray sky overhead, the cool air faintly fragrant with decay: "Is this how it is?" he asked hopefully. "Late afternoon in a perpetual autumn?"

"Not exactly," the gentleman answered. "Please keep watching." The gentleman's instruction was intended ironically, for there was no longer anything to behold: no headstones, no trees or sky, nor was there a fragrance of any kind to be blindly sensed.

“Is this how it is, then?” he asked once more. “A body frozen in blackness, a perpetual night in winter?”

“Not precisely,” the gentleman replied. “Allow your vision to become used to the darkness.”

Then it began to appear to him, glowing with a glacial illumination, a subterranean or extrastellar phosphorescence. Initially, the radiant corpse he saw seemed to be in a stiffly upright position; but he had no way of calculating his angle of perspective, which may actually have been somewhere directly above the full length of the body, rather than frontally facing its height. No less than its mold-spotted clothes, the flesh of the cadaver was in gauzy tatters, lips shrivelled to a powdery smudge on a pale shroud of a face, eyes dried up in the shells of their sockets, hair a mere sprinkling of dust. And now he imagined the feeling of death as one previously beyond his imagination. This feeling was simply that of an eternally prolonged itching sensation.

“Yes, of course,” he thought, “this is how it really must be, an incredible itch when all the fluids are gone and ragged flesh chafes in ragged clothes. A terrible itching and nothing else, nothing worse.” Then, out loud, he asked the old gentleman: “Is this, then, how it truly feels to be dead? Only this and not the altogether unimaginable horror I've always feared it would be?”

“Is that what you would now have, this true knowledge?” asked a voice, though it was not the voice of the rickety and proud-looking old man he had first imagined. This was another voice altogether, a strange voice which promised: “The true knowledge shall be yours.”

A long time passed before his body was found, its bony fingers digging into the tattered material of a plump, stuffed

armchair, its skin already crumbling and covered with the room's dust. His discoverers were some acquaintances who wondered what had become of him. And as they stood for a few numbed moments around the site of his seated corpse, a few of them absent-mindedly gave their collared necks or shirt-sleeved arms a little scratch.

Along with the trauma this unexpected discovery imposed, there was the lesser shock of the dead man's run-down home, which was not at all the place his acquaintances imagined they would find. But somehow it continued to be the better place of their imagination when—on autumn afternoons or winter nights—they recollected the thing they found in the chair, or simply reflected on the phenomenon of death itself. Often these musings would be accompanied by a tiny scratch or two just behind the ears or at the base of the neck.

Macabre Horror (1989 Crypt Of Cthulhu Version)

First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu #68*, 1989 as part of 'Studies In Horror'.

To others he always tried to convey the impression that he lived in a better place than he actually did, one far more comfortable and far less decayed. "If they could only see what things are really like, rotting all around me."

Feeling somewhat morose, he closed his eyes and sank down into gloomy reflections. He was sitting in a plump, stuffed chair which was sprouting in several places through the worn upholstery.

"Would you like to know how it feels to be dead?" he imagined a voice asking him.

"Yes, I would," he imagined answering.

A rickety but rather proud-looking gentleman—this is how he imagined the voice—led him past the graveyard gates. (And they were flaking with age and squeaking in the wind, just as he always imagined they would.) The quaintly tilting headstones, the surrounding grove of vaguely stirring trees, the soft gray sky overhead, the cool air faintly fragrant with decay: "Is this how it is?" he asked hopefully. "Late afternoon in a perpetual autumn?"

"Not exactly," the gentleman answered. "Please keep watching."

The gentleman's instruction was intended ironically, for there was no longer anything to behold: no headstones, no trees or sky, nor was there a fragrance of any kind to be blindly sensed.

“Is this how it is, then?” he asked once more. “A body frozen in blackness, a perpetual night in winter?”

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Then it began to appear to him, glowing with a glacial illumination, a subterranean or extrastellar phosphorescence. Initially, the radiant corpse he saw seemed to be in a stiffly upright position; but he had no way of calculating his angle of perspective, which may actually have been somewhere directly above the full length of the body, rather than frontally facing its height. No less than its mold-spotted clothes, the flesh of the cadaver was in gauzy tatters, lips shrivelled to a powdery smudge on a pale shroud of a face, eyes dried up in the shells of their sockets, hair a mere sprinkling of dust. And now he imagined the feeling of death as one previously beyond his imagination. This feeling was simply that of an eternally prolonged itching sensation.

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“Is that what you would now have, this true knowledge?” asked a voice, though it was not the voice of the rickety and proud-looking old man he had first imagined. This was an-

other voice altogether, a strange voice which promised: “Then the true knowledge shall be yours.”

A long time passed before his body was found, its bony fingers digging into the tattered material of a plump, stuffed armchair, its skin already crumbling and covered with the room's dust. His discoverers were some acquaintances who wondered what had become of him. And as they stood for a few numbed moments around the site of his seated corpse, a few of them absent-mindedly gave their collared necks or shirt-sleeved arms a little scratch.

Along with the trauma this unexpected discovery imposed, there was the lesser shock of the dead man's run-down home, which was not at all the place his acquaintances imagined they would find. But somehow it continued to be the better place of their imagination when—on autumn afternoons or winter nights—they recollected the thing they found in the chair, or simply reflected on the phenomenon of death itself. Often these musings would be accompanied by a tiny scratch or two just behind the ears or at the base of the neck.

The Puppet Masters (2011 Noctuary Version)

First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu #68*, 1989 as 'Puppet Horror', a section of *Studies In Horror*.

The one sitting all cock-eyed was telling me things. Of course, its soft and carefully sewn mouth was not moving. None of their mouths move unless I make them. Nonetheless I can still understand them when they have something to say, which is actually quite often. They have lived through things no one would believe.

And they are all over my room. This one is on the floor, lying flat on its little stomach with its head propped within the crux of its two hands, a tiny foot waving in the air behind. That one is lazily sprawled high upon an empty shelf, leaning on its elbow, a thin leg of cloth peaked like a triangle. They are everywhere else too: in the fireplace that I would never light; in my most comfortable chair which they make seem gigantic; even under my bed, a great many of them, as well as in it. I usually occupy a small stool in the middle of the room, and the room is always very quiet. Otherwise it would be difficult to hear their voices, which are faint and slightly hoarse, as might be expected from such throats as theirs.

Who else would listen to them and express what they have been through? Who else could understand their fears, however petty they may seem at times? To a certain degree, then, they are dependent on me. Patiently I attend to histor-

ies and anecdotes of existences beyond the comprehension of most. Never, I believe, have I given them reason to feel that the subtlest fluctuations of their anxieties, the least nuance of their cares, have not been accounted for by me and given sympathetic consideration.

Do I ever speak to them of my own life? No; that is, not since a certain incident that occurred some time ago. To this day I don't know what came over me. Absent-mindedly I began confessing some trivial worry. I've completely forgotten what it was. And at that moment all their voices suddenly stopped, every one of them, leaving an insufferable vacuum of silence.

Eventually they began speaking to me again, and all was as it had been before. But I shall never forget that interim of terrible silence, just as I shall never forget the expression of infinite evil on their faces which rendered me speechless thereafter.

They, of course, continue to talk on and on... from ledge and shelf, floor and chair, from under the bed and in it. If they should ever stop talking to me again, I think I would go mad. Still, my greatest wish is to engage them in a colloquy of horrors. But I cannot make their mouths and my own move at the same time.

The Puppet Masters (1994 Noctuary Version)

First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu #68*, 1989 as 'Puppet Horror', a section of *Studies In Horror*. There is no difference between the two versions; this is included merely for completeness.

The one sitting all cock-eyed was telling me things. Of course its soft and carefully sewn mouth was not moving, none of their mouths move unless I make them. Nonetheless I can still understand them when they have something to say, which is actually quite often. They have lived through things no one would believe.

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They, of course, continue to talk on and on... from ledge and shelf, floor and chair, from under the bed and in it.

Primordial Loathing (2011 Noctuary Version)

First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu #68*, 1989 as 'Prehistoric Horror', a section of *Studies In Horror*.

I cannot imagine how this voice invaded the dream, yet did not belong to it.

"O intelligent life of a fool's future," it said. "Hear this song."

"If only you could gaze with me from this mere rock, this dull slab which is yet a throne to roiling seas. And if only you could sense beneath those churning waters the slow fierce music of a dim world of monsters. How, then, you would wish yourself to turn about and come back to this land without the maddening patterns and plans of your day. Upon the mist which veils a rustling paradise you could mindlessly gaze at chaotic undulations amidst vines and greenish vapor, the flickering dance of innumerable tails and tongues. And above in the skies smeared over with ashen clouds—leathery wings flapping. Dear fallen beast, how you would regret the empty dreams of your time and of all time to come if only you could see through my lidless eyes this world innocent of hope."

"Innocent of hope, perhaps," I thought upon waking in the darkness. "And yet, O wide-eyed lizard, I would hear you sing something of your pain and your panic—the struggle of life and death in a so-called paradise of prehistory. To me it

is no temptation, this lyric of long-ago life—of slime itself, of ooze as such.

"I scorn your eloquence, the poetry of a *living* oblivion, and now seek a simpler style of annihilation. My hopes remain intact. Your split-tongued words were merely a boorish intrusion on a dream of much deeper things—the Incomparably Remote. That is what I seek; not a place rife with the organic.

"And now let me close my eyes once again to follow in dreams the path far beyond *all* sounds and shapes, falling into that world where I am the brother of silence and share a single face with the void."

But the reptile's voice continues to mock me, night after night. It will laugh and rave throughout all the humid nights of history. Until that perfect lid of darkness falls over this world once more.

Primordial Loathing (1994 Noctuary Version)

First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu #68*, 1989 as 'Prehistoric Horror', a section of *Studies In Horror*.

I cannot imagine how this voice invaded the dream, yet did not belong to it.

"O intelligent life of a fool's future," it said, "hear this song. If only you could gaze with me from this mere rock, this dull slab which is yet a throne to roiling seas and to the mist which veils a rustling paradise. And beneath those churning waters—the slow fierce music of a dim world of monsters. And upon the unpatterned lands—chaotic undulations amidst vines and greenish vapor, the flickering dance of innumerable tails and tongues. And above in the skies smeared over with ashen clouds—leathery wings flapping. O fallen beast, if only you could see all this through my lidless eyes, this sacred world innocent of hope, how willingly you would then follow the death of all your empty dreams."

"Innocent of hope, perhaps," I thought upon waking in the darkness. "And yet, O wide-eyed lizard, I would hear you sing something of your pain and your panic. A paradise of prehistory, indeed. How finely spoken. But a lyric of life all the same—of slime itself, of ooze as such.

"I scorn your eloquence and your world, the poetry of a living oblivion, and now seek a simpler style of annihilation. My hopes remain intact. Your split-tongued words were

merely a boorish intrusion on a dream of much deeper things—the Incomparably Remote.

“And now let me close my eyes once again to follow in dreams the backward path far beyond all noise and numbers, falling into that world where I am the brother of silence and share a single face with the void.”

But the reptile's voice continues to mock me, night after night. It will laugh and rave throughout all the humid nights of history. Until that perfect lid of darkness falls over this world once more.

Prehistoric Horror (1989 Crypt Of Cthulhu Version)

First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu #68*, 1989 as part of 'Studies In Horror'.

I cannot imagine how this voice invaded the dream, yet did not belong to it.

"O intelligent life of a fool's future," it said, "hear this song. If only you could gaze with me from this mere rock, this dull slab which is yet a throne to roiling seas and to the mist which veils a rustling paradise. And beneath those churning waters—the slow fierce music of a dim world of monsters, deep eyes ever searching. And upon the unpatterned lands—chaotic undulations amidst vines and greenish vapor, the flickering dance of innumerable tails and tongues. And above in the skies smeared over with ashen clouds—leathery wings flapping. O fallen beast, if only you could see all this through my lidless eyes, this sacred world innocent of hope, how willingly you would then follow the death of all your empty dreams."

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"I scorn your eloquence and your world, the poetry of a *living* oblivion, and now seek a simpler style of annihilation.

My hopes remain intact. Your split-tongued words were merely a boorish intrusion on a dream of much deeper things—the Incomparably Remote.

"And now let me close my eyes once again to follow in dreams the backward path far beyond *all* noise and numbers, falling into that world where I am the brother of silence and share a single face with the void."

But the reptile's voice continues to mock me, night after night.

And it will laugh and rave throughout all the humid nights of history. Until that perfect lid of darkness falls over this world once more.

The Nameless Horror (2011 Noctuary Version)

First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu #68*, 1989 as 'Nameless Horror', a section of *Studies In Horror*

The place was an old studio. To him it seemed abandoned, yet who knows? Certainly nothing there was in its place—not the broken odds and ends lying about, not the scattered papers, not even the dust. The panes of the skylight were caked with it. Yet who can be sure? Perhaps there was some imperceptible interval between occupation and abandonment, some fine phase of things which he was simply unable to detect at the moment. He stooped and picked up a few of the wrinkled papers, which appeared to be drawings. Now a little rain began drooling down the panes of the skylight.

He looked at the drawings, shuffling a stack of them page after page before his eyes. So elaborate, everything in them was made of tiny hairs or little veins, insect veins. There were shapes. He could not tell what they were supposed to be, but something about them, their chaotic intricacy, suggested horrors beyond all reason. A little rain seeped in through some fine cracks in the windowpanes above; it dripped down and made strange marks on the dusty floor of the old studio.

Someone was coming up the stairs outside the door of the studio. So he hid behind that door, and, when that indi-

vidual entered, he slipped out unseen. He tiptoed down the stairs, and ran through the streets.

He was walking now. The rain was sluicing vigorously in the gutters. And in that tumbling run-off he saw something he could not identify, something of a highly complex nature. It looked like the bristling tail of a small animal, but it was also making weird wriggling movements as if it were moving on its own. When it was farther away, the object lost its definition. The thing's tortuous composition in which he thought he discerned a face could no longer alarm him.

But the rain was coming down even harder now, so he retreated into a shelter along the street. It was just a little room with a wooden bench, open on one side and rain running off its roof, long watery ropes of rain that were swinging a little in the wind. The frayed edges of shadows were waving on the three walls. Damp smell, with something else too, some unsavory enigma about the place, something in its very outlines, its contours. What was it that happened in here, and could that be a little blood over there?

The bench where he had sat down was now gleaming with dampness in the moonlight. At the other end, almost entirely absorbed into the dark little corner, was a bent figure, almost folded in half. It groaned and moved a little. Finally it straightened up, and its tangled hair tumbled down into the moonlight. Along the bench it slid, dragging itself and its rags slowly to his side. He, on the other hand, could not move an inch, not a hair.

From somewhere within all that knotted intricacy, a pair of eyes opened, and then a pair of lips. They spoke to him: “Let me tell you what my name is.”

But that was all he could take. When the figure leaned over, smiling so placidly, those shapeless lips had to whisper their words into the cold damp ear of a corpse.

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The drawings. He shuffled a stack of them page after page before his eyes. So intricate, everything in them was made of tiny, tiny hairs or little veins, insect veins. There were shapes: he could not tell what they were supposed to be, but something about the shape of the shapes, their twistings and the way they flared around, was so horrible. A little rain seeped in through some fine cracks in the windowpanes above; it dripped down and made strange marks on the dusty floor of the old studio.

Someone was coming up the stairs outside the door of the studio. So he hid behind that door, and, when that someone came in, he, without looking back, went out.

Tip-toeing down the stairs, running down the street in the rain.

He was walking now, and the rain was sluicing vigorously in the gutters. And something else that he saw was in there too. It looked like the tail of an animal, but a very intricate tail. It was being dragged slowly along by the run-off in the gutter, and it made weird wriggling movements. When it was farther away, the intricacies of the object—those involved patterns in which he thought he saw a face smiling so peacefully—were no longer discernible, and he felt relieved.

But the rain was coming down even harder now, so he retreated into a shelter along the street. It was just a little room with a wooden bench, open on one side and rain running off its roof, long watery ropes of rain that were swinging a little in the wind. Very damp in there, and the frayed edges of shadows waving on the three walls. Damp smell, with something else too, some unsavory enigma about the place, something in its very outlines, its contours. What was it that happened in here, and could that be a little blood over there?

The bench where he had sat down was now gleaming with dampness under moonlight. At the other end, almost entirely absorbed into the dark little corner, was a bent figure, almost folded in half. It groaned and moved a little. Finally it straightened up, and its intricately tangled hair came tumbling down into the moonlight. Along the bench it slid, dragging itself and its rags slowly to his side. He, on the other hand, could not move an inch, not a hair.

Then, from somewhere within all that tangled intricacy, a pair of eyes opened, and a pair of lips. And they said to him: “Let me tell you what my name is.”

But when the figure leaned over, smiling so placidly, those shapeless lips had to whisper their words into the cold damp ear of a corpse.

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Someone was coming up the stairs outside the door of the studio. So he hid behind that door, and, when that someone

came in, he, without looking back, went out. Tip-toeing down the stairs, running down the street in the rain.

He was walking now, and the rain was sluicing vigorously in the gutters. And something else that he saw was in there too. It looked like the tail of an animal, but a very intricate tail. It was being dragged slowly along by the run-off in the gutter, and it made weird wriggling movements. When it was farther away, the intricacies of the object—those involved patterns in which he thought he saw a face smiling so peacefully—were no longer discernible, and he felt relieved.

But the rain was coming down even harder now, so he retreated into a shelter along the street. It was just a little room with a wooden bench, open on one side and rain running off its roof, long watery ropes of rain that were swinging a little in the wind. Very damp in there, and the frayed edges of shadows waving on the three walls. Damp smell, with something else too, some unsavory enigma about the place, something in its very outlines, its contours. What was it that happened in here, and could that be a little blood over there?

The bench where he had sat down was now gleaming with dampness under moonlight. At the other end, almost entirely absorbed into the dark little corner, was a bent figure, almost folded in half. It groaned and moved a little. Finally it straightened up, and its intricately tangled hair came tumbling down into the moonlight. Along the slick bench it slid, dragging itself and its rags slowly to his side. He, on the other hand, could not move an inch, not a hair.

Then, from somewhere within all that intricacy, a pair of eyes opened, and a pair of lips. And they said to him: “Let me tell you what my name is.”

But when the figure leaned over, smiling so placidly, those shapeless lips had to whisper their words into the cold damp ear of a corpse.

The Career of Nightmares (2011 Noctuary Version)

First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu #68*, 1989 as 'Nightmare Horror', a section of *Studies In Horror*

No one knows how entrance is made; no one recalls by what route such scenes are arrived at. There might be a soft tunnel of blackness, possibly one without arching walls or solid flooring, a vague streamlined enclosure down which one floats toward a shadowy terminus. Then suddenly, unexpectedly, a light flares up and spreads, props appear all around, the scenario is laid out and learned in an instant, while that ingress of blackness—that dull old tunnel—is forgotten. On the other hand, perhaps there is no front door to the dream, no first act to the drama: a gallery of manikins abruptly wakes and they all take up their roles in mid-speech, without a beginning to go back to.

But the significant thing is not to begin but to continue, not to arrive but to stay. This is the founding condition, the one on which all others are grounded and raised: restriction, incarceration is the law of the structure. And *this* structure, an actual edifice now, is a strange one; complete in itself, it is not known to be part of a larger landscape, as if perfectly painted mountains had been left without a lake or sky on a wide white canvas. Is it a hospital? Museum? Drab labyrinth of offices? Or just some nameless... institution? Whatever it may be like outside the building, inside—for those who have

important business there—it feels very late, as if time has run out and a crucial appointment has been missed.

In which room was it supposed to take place? Is this even the right section of the building, the correct floor? All the hallways look the same without proper lighting or helpful passersby—and none of the rooms is numbered. But numbers are of no assistance, going from empty room to empty room is futile. That vital meeting has already been missed and nothing in the world can make up for this loss.

Finally, a kind of climax is reached in the shadows beneath a stairway, where one has taken refuge from the consequences of failure.

And within this apparent haven there is an entirely new development: multitudes of huge spiders hang in drooping webs above and around you. Your presence has disturbed them and they begin to move, their unusual bodies maneuvering about. But however horrible they may be, you know that you need them.

For they are the ones who show you the way out; it is their touch which guides you and reminds you how to take leave of this torture. Everyone recalls this final flight from the nightmare; everyone knows how to scream.

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portant business there—it is very late, and the time has somehow slipped by for a crucial appointment.

In which room was it supposed to take place. Is this even the right section of the building, the correct floor? All the hallways look the same—without proper lighting or helpful passersby—and none of the rooms is numbered. But numbers are of no assistance, going from empty room to empty room is futile. That vital meeting has already been missed and nothing in the world can make up for this loss.

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Invocation to the Void (1994 Noctuary Version)

First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu #68*, 1989 as 'Occult Horror', a section of *Studies In Horror*.

Five candles burned the whole time, at the five points of the star. They never went out. The man standing in the middle was tall, his forehead taut. His shirt was once white but had yellowed to reflect the moon in the dark sky above the twisted trees outside the window. Inside there was only that great empty room with the single star, the five candles, and the man.

Also there was the book, which the man knelt to read at the center of the star. Book of the Damned. It told of other worlds, and the man summoned them. He had visions, visions in the smoke of the candles, in the light of the moon which shone on the dull dark floor of the room. The patterns on the walls swirled in the candlelight and in the moonlight.

Worlds bloomed and withered, spun and stopped, flourished and decayed. In the smoke of the candles. But they were all the same. All of them had different colors, just as the one he knew, and different seasons: each beat like a hunted heart. "No more blood," he cried, choking. "These worlds merely mimic my own." And again: "No more blood!"

The candles, the moon, the patterns on the wall, and the howling wind heard; and all agreed to welcome him to this other world, which was already theirs.

Now it would be his.

The flames barely fluttered as he collapsed into the star, his face so white above his yellow shirt and beneath the yellow moon. A beautiful, bloodless white.

How foolish they were who thought he was dead: who buried him in that sticky earth, so moist and warm in summer. And dark as blood.

Occult Horror (1989 Crypt Of Cthulhu Version)

First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu #68*, 1989 as part of 'Studies In Horror'.

Gruesome fate.

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The Eternal Mirage (2011 Noctuary Version)

First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu #68*, 1989 as 'Dreamworld Horror', a section of *Studies In Horror*.

Illusions struggle with illusions.

And in the expansive silence of that landscape nothing is settled or certain, not excepting the image of infinity presented by the stars and blackness that seem to spread immensely above. For below, one may vow, extends another blackness, an endless ebony plateau whose surface is like polished stone. There the sky would appear to have thrown down stars, setting them within the shining darkness of the lower world so that it might contemplate from afar these glittering relics, scintillating cast-offs from its ancient treasure, the brilliant debris of its dreams.

Thus, both above and below one may see the flickering of these luminous motes, quivering bodies held captive in the unbroken web of blackness. And the abysmal web itself seems to tremble; for nothing there is at peace or secure in its nature. Even the emptiness that separates the starlight from its reflection upon the great glassy plain is an imitation void. For, having made the level land its mirror, the sky has gazed too long and too deeply, reaching into itself and embracing its own visions, saturating the distance between the thing and its simulacrum. All space is virtual; the infinite is illusory. There, in that landscape, a dimension has died, annihilating depth and leaving behind only a lustrous image

which seems to float far and wide upon the infinite surface of a black ocean.

And it is said that this ocean is itself merely a starry phantasm glimpsed in certain eyes… eyes that may be seen as one wanders the streets of strange cities… eyes that are like two stars shining deep in a black mirror.

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The Interminable Equation (2011 Noctuary Version)

First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu #68*, 1989 as 'Nihilistic Horror', a section of *Studies In Horror*

After tabulating our number of days on this earth, we would still have to multiply this sum several times in order to take into account our dreams—those days *inside* our days. Several more hypothetical lifetimes must therefore be added, including those in which the dead continue to live and those in which the living are dead; those in which such trivial occurrences as an innocent laugh acquire a profound meaning and those in which most awesome events have none at all; those which are made very strange by supernatural powers and those in which magic itself seems commonplace; those in which we play ourselves and those in which we seem to be someone else; those in which everything appears frightening and harmful and those in which indifference is the single note that sounds throughout.

These contradictions make our dreams seem negligible, and this is what enables them to be ignored in the tabulation of our days.

But there are still those dreams which are waiting for others to come along whose terms and conditions will cancel them out. These are the leftover dreams, our dark days, which have yet to fall victim to mathematics, and they are the only ones that count for anything. And it is the same with our waking days. Only a few of those escape nullifica-

tion by contradiction, that process of cancellation which is going on all the time.

In any case, neither dreams nor days ever survive long before their counterparts annihilate them. It is quite possible that, in our last moments, there will be nothing left which we might look back on as a lifetime.

But will this nothingness itself endure, or will it too be cancelled out by some inviolable and unsuspected form of being, terminating at last in a kind of double oblivion?

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After tabulating our number of days on this earth, we would still have to multiply this sum several times in order to take into account our dreams—those days inside our nights. Several more lifetimes must therefore be added, including those in which the dead continue to live and those in which the living are dead; those in which such trivial occurrences as an innocent laugh acquire a profound meaning and those in which the most awesome events have none at all; those which are made very strange by supernatural powers and those in which magic itself seems commonplace; those in which we play ourselves and those in which we seem to be someone else; those in which everything appears frightening and harmful and those in which indifference is the single note that sounds throughout.

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with our waking days. Only a few of those escape nullification by contradiction, that process of cancellation which is going on all the time.

In any case, neither dreams nor days ever survive long before their counterparts step up and annihilate them. It is quite possible that, in our last moments, there will be nothing left which we might look back on as a lifetime.

But will this nothingness itself endure, or will it too be cancelled out by some inviolable and unsuspected form of being, terminating at last in a kind of double oblivion?

The Strange Design Of Master Rignolo (2011 Noctuary Version)

First published in *Grue Magazine* #10, 1989

It was well into evening and for some time Nolon had been seated at a small table in a kind of park. This was a long, thin stretch of land—vaguely triangular in shape, like a piece of broken glass—bordered by three streets of varying breadth, varying evenness of surface, and varying stages of disintegration as each thoroughfare succumbed in its own way and in its own time to the subtle but continuous movements of the slumbering earth below. From the far end of the park a figure in a dark overcoat was approaching Nolon's table, and it appeared there was going to be a meeting of some sort.

There were other tables here and there, all of them unoccupied, but most of the park was unused ground covered with a plush, fuzzy kind of turf. In the moonlight this densely woven pile of vegetation turned a soft shade of aquamarine, almost radiant. Beyond the thinning trees, stars were bright but without luster, as if they were made of luminous paper. Around the park, a jagged line of high roofs, black and featureless, crossed the sky like the uneven teeth of an old saw.

Nolon was resting his hands at the edge of the small, nearly circular table. In the middle of the table a piece of

candle flickered inside a misshapen bubble of green glass, and Nolon's face was bathed in a restless green glare. He too was wearing a dark overcoat, unbuttoned at the top to reveal a scarf of lighter shade stuffed inside it. The scarf was wrapped about Nolon's neck right to the base of his chin. Every so often Nolon glanced up, not to look at Grissul as he proceeded across the park, but to try and catch sight of something in that lighted window across the street: a silhouette which at irregular intervals slipped in and out of view. Above the window was a long, low roof surmounted by a board which appeared to be a sign or marquee. The lettering on this board was entirely unreadable, perhaps corroded by the elements or even deliberately effaced. But the image of two tall, thin bottles could still be seen, their slender necks angled festively this way and that.

Grissul sat down, facing Nolon at eye level.

“Have you been here long?” he asked.

Nolon calmly pulled out a watch from deep inside his coat. He stared at it for a few moments, tapped the glass once or twice, then gently pushed it back inside his coat.

“Someone must have known I was thinking about seeing you,” Grissul continued, “because I've got a little story I could tell.”

Nolon again glanced toward the lighted window across the street. Grissul noticed this and twisted his head around, saying, “Well, someone's there after all. Do you think tonight we could get, you know, a little service of some kind?”

“Maybe you could go over there yourself and see what our chances are,” Nolon replied.

“All the same to me,” Grissul said, twisting his head back to face Nolon. “I've still got my news.”

“Is that specifically why this meeting is taking place?”

To this query Grissul returned a blank expression. “Not that I know of,” he asserted. “As far as I'm concerned, we just met by chance.”

“Of course,” Nolon agreed, smiling a little. Grissul smiled back but with much less subtlety.

“So I was going to tell you,” Grissul began, “that I was out in that field, the one behind those empty buildings at the edge of town where everything just slides away and goes off in all directions. And there's a marsh by there, makes the ground a little, I don't know, stringy or something. No trees, though, only a lot of wild grass, reeds, you know where I mean?”

“I now have a good idea,” Nolon replied, a trifle bored or at least pretending to be.

“This was a little before dark that I was there. I really wasn't planning to do anything, let me say that. I just walked a ways out onto the field, changed direction a few times, and walked some more. Then I saw something through a blind of huge stalks of some kind, skinny as your finger but with these great spiky heads on top. And really very stiff, not bending at all, just sort of wobbling in the breeze. They might well have creaked, I don't know, when I pushed my way through to see beyond them. Then I knelt down to get a better look at something I saw on the ground. I'm telling you, Mr. Nolon, it was right *in* the ground. It appeared to be a part of it, like—”

“Mr. Grissul, *what* appeared?”

Grissul remembered himself and found a tone of voice not so exhausting of his own strength, nor so wearing on his listener's patience.

“The face,” he said, leaning back in his chair. “It was right there, about the size of, I don't know, a window or a picture hanging on a wall, except that it was in the ground and it was a big oval, not rectangular in any way. Just as if someone had partly buried a giant, or better yet, a giant's *mask*. Except the edges of the face seemed not so much buried as, well, *woven* I guess you would say, right into the ground. The eyes were closed, not *shut* closed—it didn't seem to be dead—but relaxed. The same with the lips, very heavy lips that were slightly parted. And it had an even complexion, ashy gray, and soft cheeks. They *looked* soft, I mean, because I didn't actually touch them in any way. I think it was asleep.”

Nolon shifted slightly in his chair and looked straight into Grissul's eyes.

“Then come and see for yourself,” Grissul insisted. “The moon's bright enough.”

“That's not the problem. I'm perfectly willing to go along with you, whatever might be there. But for once I have other plans.”

“Oh, other plans,” repeated Grissul as if some deeply hidden secret had been revealed. “And what other plans would those be, Mr. Nolon?”

“Plans of relatively long standing and not altered since made, if you can conceive of such a thing these days. Are you listening? Oh, I thought you nodded off. Well, Rignolo, that mysterious little creature, has made a rare move. He's asked if I would like to have a look around his studio. No one's ever been there that I know of. And no one's actually seen what he paints.”

“No one that you know of,” added Grissul.

“Of course. Until tonight, that is, a little while from now unless a change of plans is necessary. Otherwise I shall be the first to see what all that talk of his is about. It should really be worth the trouble, and I could invite you to come along.”

Grissul's lower lip pushed forward a little. “Thank you, Mr. Nolon,” he said, “but that's more in your line. I thought when I told you about my observation this evening—”

“Of course, your observation is very interesting, extraordinary, Mr. Grissul. But I think that sort of thing can wait, don't you? Besides, I haven't told you anything of Rignolo's work.”

“You can tell me.”

“Landscapes, Mr. Grissul. Nothing but landscapes. Exclusively his subject, a point he even brags about. No individuals. No crowds. Nothing that would suggest habitation and its horrors. Only placid panoramas where nothing moves, nothing lives or dies.”

“That's very interesting, too.”

“I thought you would say something like that. And you might be even more interested if you had ever heard Rignolo discourse on his canvases. But... well, you can see and hear for yourself. What do you say, then? First Rignolo's studio and then straight out to see if we can find that old field again?”

They agreed that these activities, in this sequence, would not be the worst way to fill an evening.

As they got up from the table, Nolon had a last look at the window across the street. The light that once brightened it must have been put out during his conversation with Grissul. So there was no way of knowing whether or not

someone was now observing them. Buttoning their overcoats as far as their scarfed necks, the two men walked in silence across the park upon which countless stars stared down like the dead eyes of sculptured faces.

“Don't just walk stepping everywhere,” Rignolo told his visitors as they all entered the studio. He was a little out of breath from the climb up the stairs, wheezing his words, quietly muttering to himself, “This place, oh, this place.” There was hardly a patch of floor that was not in some way cluttered over, so he need not have warned Nolon, or even Grissul. Rignolo was of lesser stature than his guests, virtually a dwarf, and so moved with greater freedom through that cramped space. “You see,” he said, “how this isn't really a room up here, just a little closet that tried to grow into one, bulging out every which way and making all these odd niches and alcoves surrounding us, this shapeless gallery of *nooks*. There's a window around here, I suppose, under some of these canvases. But those are what you're here for, not to look out some window that who knows where it is. Nothing to see out there, even so.”

Rignolo then ushered his visitors through the shrunken maze composed of recesses of one sort or another, indicating to them a canvas here or there. Each somehow held itself to a wall or was leaning against one as if with exhaustion. Having brought their attention to this or that picture, he would step a little to the side and allow them to admire his work, standing there like a polite but slightly bored curator of some seldom-visited museum, a pathetic figure attired in oversized clothes of woven… dust. His small ovoid face was as lifeless as a mask: his skin had the same faded complexion as his clothes and was just as slack, flabby; his lips were the

same color as his skin but more full and taut; his hair shot out in tufts from his head, uncontrolled, weedy; and his eyes showed too much white, having to all appearances rolled up halfway into his forehead, as if they were trying to peek under it.

While Nolon was gazing at one of Rignolo's landscapes, Grissul seemed unable to shake off a preoccupation with the artist himself, though he was obviously making the effort. But the more he tried to turn his attention away from Rignolo, the more easily it was drawn back to the flabby skin, the faded complexion, the undisciplined shocks of hair. Finally, Grissul gave a little nudge to Nolon and began to whisper something. Nolon looked at Grissul in a way that might have said, "Yes, I know, but have some sense of decorum in any case," then resumed his contemplation of Rignolo's excellent landscapes.

They were all very similar to one another. Given such titles as *Inorganic Universe*, *The Tract of Extinction*, and *Insentient Traveler*, they did not depict as much as *suggest* the promised subjects, as obscure as they may seem. A vague hint of forms might emerge here and there, some effect of color or outline, but for the most part they could be described as a rejection of material being, an objection to presence and a devotion to absence. Naturally, Grissul concluded that these works were intended to mock and confuse those who looked upon them. Perhaps it was Rignolo's intuition that just such a protest might be forthcoming that inspired—in the rapid, frantic voice of a startled sleeper—the following outburst.

"Think anything you like about these scenes, it's all the same to me. Whisper to each other, my hearing is wonder-

fully bad. Say that my landscapes do not invite one's eyes to pass into them and wander, let alone linger for the briefest moment. Nevertheless, that is exactly their purpose, and as far as I am concerned they are quite adequate to it. I have spent extraordinary lengths of time within the borders of each canvas, both as maker and as casual inhabitant, until the borders no longer exist for me and I do not exist for them. Understand that when I say *inhabitant* I do not in any way mean that I take my clumsy feet tromping up and down staircases of color, or that I stand this stunted body of mine upon some lofty ledge where I can play the master of all I see. There are no masters of these scenes and no seers, because bodies and their organs cannot function there—no place for them to go, nothing to survey with ordinary eyes, no thoughts to think for the mighty brain. And my thoroughfares will not take you anywhere because there is nowhere to go and no one to go there. You can stay where you are and not make any *great journeys*, certainly not from this world to any other. What I mean to say is that to *inhabit* my landscapes one must, in no figurative sense, grow into them. At best they are a paradise for sleepwalkers, but only those sleepwalkers who never rise to their feet, who forget their destination, and who may thus never reach that ultimate darkness beyond dreams, but may loiter in perpetuity in these lands of mine, which neighbor on nothingness and stand next door to endlessness. So you see, my critics, what we have in these little pictures is a perpetual communion with the void, a vital annihilation and a thoroughly decorative eternity of—"

"All the same," Grissul interjected, "it does sound unpleasant."

“You're interfering,” Nolon said under his breath.

“The old bag of wind,” Grissul said under his.

“And just where do you see unpleasantness? Quite the opposite if you ask me. I am known for my landscapes, and what I claim is that salvation is to be found only when one is joined with the landscape. Nolon understands. We need not go the way of anguish when such a hideaway is so near at hand—a land of escape. For the initiated, each of those canvases is a cove one may enter into and drift insensibly; each line—jagged or merely jittery—is a shoreline where you stare obliviously out to sea, until a tide sweeps in and pulls you painlessly away; each crinkled wad of radiance is a star in whose light you bask while mindlessly waiting for yours to go out. This, gentlemen, is a case of making the most of one's talent for pro-jec-tion. There indeed exist actual locales that have inspired my pictures, I admit that. But these places keep their distance from the spectator; whereas my new landscapes make you feel at home, those old ones put you off, hold you at arm's length, and in the end throw you right out of the picture. That's the way it is out there—everything looks at you with vicious eyes. But you can get around this intolerable situation, jump the fence, so to speak, and trespass into a world where you *belong* for a change. If my landscapes look unfamiliar to you, it is only because everything looks different from the other side. All this will be understood much more clearly when you have seen my masterwork. Step this way, please.”

Nolon and Grissul glanced blankly at each other and then followed the artist up to a narrow door. Opening the door with a tiny key, Rignolo ushered his guests inside. It was a tight squeeze through the doorway.

“Now *this* place really is a closet,” Grissul whispered to Nolon. “I don't think I can turn around.”

“Then we'll just have to walk out of here backwards as if there were something wrong with that.”

The door slammed closed and for a moment there was no place on earth darker than that little room.

“Watch the walls,” Rignolo called through the door.

“Walls?” someone whispered.

The first images to appear in the darkness were those crinkled wads of radiance Rignolo spoke of, except these were much larger, more numerous, and became more radiant than the others bound within their cramped little canvases. And they emerged on all sides of the spectator, above and below as well, so that an irresistible conviction was instilled that the tiny grave-like room had expanded into a star-strewn corridor of night, the certainty created that one was suspended in space without practical means of remaining there. Reaching out for the solid walls, crouching on the floor, only brought confusion rather than relief from the sense of impossibility. The irregular daubs of brightness grew into great silver blotches, each of them ragged at its rim and glowing wildly. Then they stopped growing in the blackness, attaining some predesigned composition, and another kind of growing began: thin filaments of bluish light started sprouting in the spaces between those bulbous thistles of brilliance, running everywhere like cracks up and down a wall. And these threadlike tendrils eventually spread across the blackness in an erratic fury of propagation, until all was webbed and stringy in the universal landscape. Then the webbing began to fray and become shaggy, cosmic moss hanging in luminous clumps, beards. But the scene was not

muddled, no more so, that is, than the most natural marsh or fen-like field. Finally, enormous stalks shot out of nowhere, quickly crisscrossed to form interesting and well-balanced patterns, and suddenly froze. They were a strange shade of green and wore burry crowns of a pinkish color, like prickly brains.

The scene, it appeared, was not complete. All the actual effects were displayed: *actual* because the one further effect now being produced was most likely an illusion. For it seemed that deep within the shredded tapestry of webs and hairs and stalks, something else had been woven, something buried beneath the marshy morass but slowly rising to the surface.

“Is that a face?” someone said.

“I can begin to see one too,” said the other, “but I don't know if I want to see it. I don't think I can feel where I am now. Let's try not to look.”

A series of cries from within the little room finally induced Rignolo to open the door, which sent Nolon and Grissul tumbling backwards into the artist's studio. They lay among the debris on the floor for some time. Rignolo swiftly secured the door, and then stood absolutely still beside it, his upturned eyes taking no interest in his visitors’ predicament. As they regained their feet, a few things were quickly settled in low voices.

“Mr. Nolon,” said Grissul, pulling at his friend's sleeve. “I recognized the place that that room is supposed to be.”

“I'm sure you did.”

“And I'm also sure I know whose face it was that I saw tonight in that field.”

“I think we should be going.”

“What are you saying?” demanded Rignolo.

Nolon gestured toward a large clock high upon the wall and asked if that was the time.

“Always,” replied Rignolo, “since I've never yet seen its hands move.”

“Well, then, thank you for everything,” said Nolon.

“We have to be *leaving*,” added Grissul.

“Just one moment,” Rignolo shouted as they were making their way out. “I know where you're going now. Someone, I won't say who, told me what you found in that field. I've done it, haven't I? You can tell me all about it. No, it's not necessary. I've put myself into the scene at last. The abyss with a decor, the ultimate flight! In short—I will pass through the very maw of the worldly beast, and without feeling the bite. Oh, perhaps there's still some work to be done. But I've made a good start, haven't I? I've got my foot in the door, my face looking in the window. Little by little, then… forever. True? No, don't say anything. Show me where it is, I need to go there. I have a right to go.”

Having no idea what sort of behavior a refusal might inspire in the maniacal Rignolo, not to mention possible reprisals from unknown parts, Nolon and Grissul respected the artist's request.

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Into a scene which makes no sound, three figures arrive. Their silhouettes move with distinct, cautious steps across an open field, progressing slowly, almost without noticeable motion. Around them, crisscrossing shafts of tall grasses are entirely motionless, their pointed tips sharply outlined in the moonlight. Above them, the moon is round and bright; but its brightness is of a dull sort, like the flat whiteness that

appears in the spaces of complex designs embellishing the page of a book.

The three figures, one of which is much shorter than the other two, have stopped and are standing completely still before a particularly dense clump of oddly shaped stalks. Now one of the taller figures has raised his arm and is pointing toward this clump of stalks, while the shorter figure has taken a step in the direction indicated. The two tall figures are standing together as the short one has all but disappeared into the dark, dense overgrowth. Only a single shoe, its toe angled groundward, remains visible. Then nothing at all.

The two remaining figures continue to stand in their places, making no gestures, their hands in the pockets of their long overcoats. They are staring into the blackness where the other one has disappeared. Around them, crisscrossing shafts of tall grasses; above them, the moon is round and bright.

Now the two figures have turned themselves away from the place where the other one disappeared. They are each slightly bent over and are holding their hands over their ears, as though to deafen themselves to something they could not bear. Then, slowly, almost without noticeable motion, they move out of the scene.

The field is empty once again. And now everything awakes with movement and sound.

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After their adventure, Nolon and Grissul returned to the same table in that place they had met earlier that evening. But where they had left a bare table-top behind them, not considering the candle-flame within its unshapely green bubble, there were at the moment two shallow glasses set

out, along with a tall, if somewhat thin bottle placed between them. They looked at the bottle, the glasses, and each other methodically, as if they did not want to rush into anything.

“Is there still, you know, someone in the window across the street?” Grissul asked.

“Do you think I should look?” Nolon asked back.

Grissul stared at the table, allowing moments to accumulate, then said, “I don't care, Mr. Nolon, I have to say that what happened tonight was very unpleasant.”

“Something like that would have happened sooner or later,” Nolon replied. “He was too much the dreamer, let's be honest. Nothing he said made any sense to speak of, and he was always saying more than he should. Who knows *who* heard what?”

“I've never heard screaming like that.”

“It's over,” said Nolon quietly.

“But what could have happened to him?” asked Grissul, gripping the shallow glass before him, apparently without awareness of the move.

“Only he could know that for certain,” answered Nolon, who mirrored Grissul's move and seemingly with the same absence of conscious intent.

“And why did he scream that way, why did he say it was all a trick, a mockery of his dreams, that ‘filthy thing in the earth’? Why did he scream not to be ‘buried forever in that strange, horrible mask’?”

“Maybe he became confused,” said Nolon. Nervously, he began pouring from the thin bottle into each of their glasses.

“And then he cried out for someone to kill him. But that's not what he wanted at all. Just the opposite. He was afraid to

you-know-what. So why would he—"

"Do I really have to explain it all, Mr. Grissul?"

"I suppose not," Grissul said very softly, looking ashamed. "He was trying to get away with something."

"Precisely," said Nolon just as softly, looking around. "He wanted to get away without having to you-know-what. He wanted out of this life without the pain and the fear. How would that look?"

"Set an example."

"Exactly."

"But to be buried alive and aware in that marsh. It's just too much."

"I think we've said enough. Now let's take advantage of the situation and drink our drinks before moving on."

"I'm not sure I want to," said Grissul.

"I'm not sure we have any say in the matter," replied Nolon.

"Yes, but—"

"Shhh. Tonight's our night."

Across the street a shadow fidgeted in the frame of a lighted window. An evening breeze moved through the little park, and the green glow of a candle flame flickered upon two silent faces.

The Strange Design Of Master Rignolo (1994 Noctuary Version)

First published in *Grue Magazine* #10, 1989

It was well into evening and for some time Nolon had been been seated at a small table in a kind of park. This was a long, thin stretch of land—vaguely triangular in shape, like a piece of broken glass—bordered by three streets of varying breadth, varying evenness of surface, and of varying stages of disintegration as each thoroughfare succumbed in its own way and in its own time to the subtle but continuous movements of the slumbering earth below. From the far end of the park a figure in a dark overcoat was approaching Nolon's table, and it appeared there was going to be a meeting of some sort.

There were other tables here and there, all of them unoccupied, but most of the park was unused ground covered with a plush, fuzzy kind of turf. In the moonlight this densely woven pile of vegetation turned a soft shade of aquamarine, almost radiant. Beyond the thinning trees, stars were bright but without luster, as if they were made of luminous paper. Around the park, a jagged line of high roofs, black and featureless, crossed the sky like the uneven teeth of an old saw.

Nolon was resting his hands at the edge of the small, nearly circular table. In the middle of the table a piece of

candle flickered inside a misshapen bubble of green glass, and Nolon's face was bathed in a restless green glare. He too was wearing a dark overcoat, unbuttoned at the top to reveal a scarf of lighter shade stuffed inside it. The scarf was wrapped about Nolon's neck right to the base of his chin. Every so often Nolon glanced up, not to look at Grissul as he proceeded across the park, but to try and catch sight of something in that lighted window across the street: a silhouette which at irregular intervals slipped in and out of view. Above the window was a long, low roof surmounted by a board which appeared to be a sign or marquee. The lettering on this board was entirely unreadable, perhaps corroded by the elements or even deliberately effaced. But the image of two tall, thin bottles could still be seen, their slender necks angled festively this way and that.

Grissul sat down, facing Nolon at eye level.

“Have you been here long?” he asked.

Nolon calmly pulled out a watch from deep inside his coat. He stared at it for a few moments, tapped the glass once or twice, then gently pushed it back inside his coat.

“Someone must have known I was thinking about seeing you,” Grissul continued, “because I've got a little story I could tell.”

Nolon again glanced toward the lighted window across the street. Grissul noticed this and twisted his head around, saying, “Well, someone's there after all. Do you think tonight we could get, you know, a little service of some kind?”

“Maybe you could go over there yourself and see what our chances are,” Nolon replied.

“All the same to me,” Grissul insisted, twisting his head back to face Nolon. “I've still got my news.”

“Is that specifically why this meeting is taking place?”

To this query Grissul returned a blank expression. “Not that I know of,” he asserted. “As far as I'm concerned, we just met by chance.”

“Of course,” Nolon agreed, smiling a little. Grissul smiled back but with much less subtlety.

“So I was going to tell you,” Grissul began, “that I was out in that field, the one behind those empty buildings at the edge of town where everything just slides away and goes off in all directions. And there's a marsh by there, makes the ground a little, I don't know, stringy or something. No trees, though, only a lot of wild grass, reeds, you know where I mean?”

“I now have a good idea,” Nolon replied, a trifle bored or at least pretending to be.

“This was a little before dark that I was there. A little before the stars began to come out. I really wasn't planning to do anything, let me say that. I just walked some ways out onto the field, changed direction a few times, walked a ways more. Then I saw something through a blind of huge stalks of some kind, skinny as your finger but with these great spiky heads on top. And really very stiff, not bending at all, just sort of wobbling in the breeze. They might well have creaked, I don't know, when I pushed my way through to see beyond them. Then I knelt down to get a better look at what was there on the ground. I'm telling you, Mr Nolon, it was right in the ground. It appeared to be a part of it, like—”

“Mr Grissul, what appeared?”

Grissul remembered himself and found a tone of voice not so exhausting of his own strength, nor so wearing on his listener's patience.

“The face,” he said, leaning back in his chair. “It was right there, about the size of, I don't know, a window or a picture hanging on a wall, except that it was in the ground and it was a big oval, not rectangular in any way. Just as if someone had partly buried a giant, or better yet, a giant's mask. Only the edges of the face seemed not so much buried as, well, woven I guess you would say, right into the ground. The eyes were closed, not shut closed—it didn't seem to be dead—but relaxed. The same with the lips, very heavy lips rubbing up against each other. Even complexion, ashy gray, and soft cheeks. They looked soft, I mean, because I didn't actually touch them in any way. I think it was asleep.”

Nolon shifted slightly in his chair and looked straight into Grissul's eyes.

“Then come and see for yourself,” Grissul insisted. “The moon's bright enough.”

“That's not the problem. I'm perfectly willing to go along with you, whatever might be there. But for once I have other plans.”

“Oh, other plans,” repeated Grissul as if some deeply hidden secret had been revealed. “And what other plans would those be, Mr Nolon?”

“Plans of relatively long standing and not altered since made, if you can conceive of such a thing these days. Are you listening? Oh, I thought you nodded off. Well, Rignolo, that mysterious little creature, has made a rare move. He's asked if I would like to have a look around his studio. No one's ever been there that I know of. And no one's actually seen what he paints.”

“No one that you know of,” added Grissul.

“Of course. Until tonight, that is, a little while from now unless a change of plans is necessary. Otherwise I shall be the first to see what all that talk of his is about. It should really be worth the trouble, and I could invite you to come along.”

Grissul's lower lip pushed forward a little. “Thank you, Mr Nolon,” he said, “but that's more in your line. I thought when I told you about my observation this evening—”

“Of course, your observation is very interesting, extraordinary, Mr Grissul. But I think that that sort of thing can wait, don't you? Besides, I haven't told you anything of Rignolo's work.”

“You can tell me.”

“Landscapes, Mr Grissul. Nothing but landscapes. Exclusively his subject, a point he even brags about.”

“That's very interesting, too.”

“I thought you would say something like that. And you might be even more interested if you had ever heard Rignolo discourse on his canvasses. But... well, you can see and hear for yourself. What do you say, then? First Rignolo's studio and then straight out to see if we can find that old field again?”

They agreed that these activities, in this sequence, would not be the worst way to fill an evening.

As they got up from the table, Nolon had a last look at the window across the street. The light that once brightened it must have been put out during his conversation with Grissul. So there was no way of knowing whether or not someone was now observing them. Buttoning their overcoats as far as their scarfed necks, the two men walked in si-

lence across the park upon which countless stars stared down like the dead eyes of sculptured faces.

"Don't just walk stepping everywhere," Rignolo told his visitors as they all entered the studio. He was a little out of breath from the climb up the stairs, wheezing his words, quietly muttering to himself, "This place, oh, this place." There was hardly a patch of floor that was not in some way cluttered over, so he need not have warned Nolon, or even Grissul. Rignolo was of lesser stature than his guests, virtually a dwarf, and so moved with greater freedom through that cramped space. "You see," he said, "how this isn't really a room up here, just a little closet that tried to grow into one, bulging out every which way and making all these odd niches and alcoves surrounding us, this shapeless gallery of nooks. There's a window around here, I suppose, under some of these canvasses. But those are what you're here for, not to look out some window that who knows where it is. Nothing to see out there, even so."

Rignolo then ushered his visitors through the shrunken maze composed of recesses of one sort or another, indicating to them a canvass here or there. Each somehow held itself to a wall or was leaning against one, as if with exhaustion. Having brought their attention to this or that picture, he would step a little to the side and allow them to admire his work, standing there like a polite but slightly bored curator of some seldom-visited museum, a pathetic figure attired in over-sized clothes of woven… dust. His small ovoid face was as lifeless as a mask: his skin had the same faded complexion as his clothes and was just as slack, flabby; his lips were the same color as his skin but more full and taut; his hair shot out in tufts from his head, uncontrolled, weedy; and his eyes

showed too much white, having to all appearances rolled up halfway into his forehead, as if they were trying to peek under it.

While Nolon was gazing at one of Rignolo's landscapes, Grissul seemed unable to shake off a preoccupation with the artist himself, though he was obviously making the effort. But the more he tried to turn his attention away from Rignolo, the more easily it was drawn back to the flabby skin, the faded complexion, the undisciplined shocks of hair. Finally, Grissul gave a little nudge to Nolon and began to whisper something. Nolon looked at Grissul in a way that might have said, “Yes, I know, but have some sense of decorum in any case,” then resumed his contemplation of Rignolo's excellent landscapes.

They were all very similar to one another. Given such titles as “Glistening Marsh”, “The Tract of Three Shadows”, and “The Stars, the Hills”, they were not intended to resemble as much as suggest the promised scenes. A vague hint of material forms might emerge here and there, some familiar effect of color or outline, but for the most part they could be described as extremely remote in their perspective on tangible reality. Grissul, who was no stranger to some of the locales purportedly depicted in these canvasses, could very well have expressed the objection that these conglomerations of fractured mass, these whirlpools of distorted light, simply did not achieve their purpose, did not in fact deserve connection with the geographical subjects from which they took their titles. Perhaps it was Rignolo's intuition that just such a protest might be forthcoming that inspired—in the rapid, frantic voice of a startled sleeper—the following outburst.

“Think anything you like about these scenes, it's all the same to me. Whisper to each other, my hearing is wonderfully bad. Say that my landscapes do not invite one's eyes to pass into them and wander, let alone linger for the briefest moment. Nevertheless, that is exactly their purpose, and as far as I am concerned they are quite adequate to it, meticulously efficient.

“I have spent extraordinary lengths of time within the borders of each canvass, both as maker and as casual inhabitant, until the borders no longer exist for me and neither does... that other thing. Understand that when I say inhabitant, I do not in any way mean that I take my clumsy feet tromping up and down staircases of color, or that I stand this stunted body of mine upon some lofty ledge where I can play the master of all I see. There are no masters of these scenes and no seers, because bodies and their organs cannot function there—no place for them to go, nothing to survey with ordinary eyes, no thoughts to think for the mighty brain. And my thoroughfares will not take you from the doorstep of one weariness to the backdoor of another, and they cannot crumble, because they are burdened with nothing to convey—their travelers are already there, continuously arriving at infinite sites of the perpetually astonishing. Yet these sites are also a homeland, and nothing there will ever threaten to become strange. What I mean to say is that to inhabit my landscapes one must, in no figurative sense, grow into them. At best they are a paradise for sleepwalkers, but only those sleepwalkers who never rise to their feet, who forget their destination, and who may thus never reach that ultimate darkness beyond dreams, but may loiter in perpetuity in these lands of mine, which neighbor on nothingness

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"You're interfering," Nolon said under his breath.

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"And just where do you see the unpleasantness? Where, show me. Nowhere, in my view. One cannot be unpleasant to one's self, one cannot be strange to oneself. I claim that all will be different when one is joined with the landscape. We need not go the way of doom when such a hideaway is so near at hand—a land of escape. For the initiated, each of those little swirls is a cove which one may enter into and become; each line—jagged or merely jittery—is a cartographer's shoreline which may be explored at all points at once; each crinkled wad of radiance is a star basking in its own light, and in yours. This, gentlemen, is a case of making the most of one's talent for pro-jec-tion. There indeed exist actual locales on which my pictures are based, I admit that. But these places keep their distance from the spectator: whereas my new landscapes make you feel at home, those old ones put you off, hold you at arm's length, and in the end throw you right out of the picture. That's the way it is out there—everything looks at you with strange eyes. But you can get around this intolerable situation, jump the fence, so to speak, and trespass into a world where you belong for a change. If my landscapes look unfamiliar to you, it is only because everything looks different from the other side. All

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“Mr Nolon, I recognized the place that that room is supposed to be.”

“I'm sure you did.”

“And I'm also sure I know whose face it was that I saw tonight in that field.”

“I think we should be going.”

“What are you saying?” demanded Rignolo.

Nolon gestured toward a large clock high upon the wall and asked if that was the time.

“Always,” replied Rignolo, “since I've never yet seen its hands move.”

“Well, then, thank you for everything,” said Nolon.

“We have to be leaving,’ added Grissul.

“Just one moment,” Rignolo shouted as they were making their way out. “I know where you're going now. Someone, I won't say who, told me what you found in that field. I've done it, haven't I? You can tell me all about it. No, it's not necessary. I've put myself into the scene at last. The abyss with a decor, the ultimate flight! In short—survival in the very maw of oblivion. Oh, perhaps there's still some work to be done. But I've made a good start, haven't I? I've got my foot in the door, my face looking in the window. Little by little, then… forever. True? No, don't say anything. Show me where it is, I need to go there. I have a right to go.”

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Into a scene which makes no sound, three figures arrive. Their silhouettes move with distinct, cautious steps across an open field, progressing slowly, almost without noticeable motion. Around them, crisscrossing shafts of tall grasses are entirely motionless, their pointed tips sharply outlined in the moonlight. Above them, the moon is round and bright; but its brightness is of a dull sort, like the flat whiteness that appears in the spaces of complex designs embellishing the page of a book.

The three figures, one of which is much shorter than the other two, have stopped and are standing completely still before a particularly dense clump of oddly shaped stalks. Now one of the taller figures has raised his arm and is pointing toward this clump of stalks, while the shorter figure has taken a step in the direction indicated. The two tall figures are standing together as the short one has all but disappeared into the dark, dense overgrowth. Only a single shoe, its toe angled groundward, remains visible. Then nothing at all.

The two remaining figures continue to stand in their places, making no gestures, their hands in the pockets of their long overcoats. They are staring into the blackness where the other one has disappeared. Around them, crisscrossing shafts of tall grasses; above them, the moon is round and bright.

Now the two figures have turned themselves away from the place where the other one disappeared. They are each slightly bent over and are holding their hands over their ears, as though to deafen themselves to something they could not bear. Then, slowly, almost without noticeable motion, they move out of the scene.

The field is empty once again. And now everything awakes with movement and sound.

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After their adventure, Nolon and Grissul returned to the same table in that place they had met earlier that evening. But where they had left a bare table-top behind them, not considering the candleflame within its unshapely green bubble, there were at the moment two shallow glasses set out, along with a tall, if somewhat thin bottle placed between them. They looked at the bottle, the glasses, and each other methodically, as if they did not want to rush into anything.

“Is there still, you know, someone in the window across the street?” Grissul asked.

“Do you think I should look?” Nolon asked back.

Grissul stared at the table, allowing moments to accumulate, then said, “I don't care, Mr Nolon, I have to say that what happened tonight was very unpleasant.”

“Something like that would have happened sooner or later,” Nolon replied. “He was too much the dreamer, let's be honest. Nothing he said made any sense to speak of, and he was always saying more than he should. Who knows who heard what.”

“I've never heard screaming like that.”

“It's over,” said Nolon quietly.

“But what could have happened to him?” asked Grissul, gripping the shallow glass before him, apparently without awareness of the move.

“Only he could know that for certain,” answered Nolon, who mirrored Grissul's move and seemingly with the same

absence of conscious intent.

“And why did he scream that way, why did he say it was all a trick, a mockery of his dreams, that ‘filthy thing in the earth’? Why did he scream not to be ‘buried forever in that strange, horrible mask’?”

“Maybe he became confused,” said Nolon. Nervously, he began pouring from the thin bottle into each of their glasses.

“And then he cried out for someone to kill him. But that's not what he wanted at all, just the opposite. He was afraid to you-know-what. So why would he—”

“Do I really have to explain it all, Mr Grissul?”

“I suppose not,” Grissul said very softly, looking ashamed. “He was trying to get away, to get away with something.”

“That's right,” said Nolon just as softly, looking around. “Because he wanted to escape from here without having to you-know-what. How would that look?”

“Set an example.”

“Exactly. Now let's just take advantage of the situation and drink our drinks before moving on.”

“I'm not sure I want to,” said Grissul.

“I'm not sure we have any say in the matter,” replied Nolon.

“Yes, but—”

“Shhh. Tonight's our night.”

Across the street a shadow fidgeted in the frame of a lighted window. An evening breeze moved through the little park, and the green glow of a candleflame flickered upon two silent faces.

The Voice In The Bones (2011 Noctuary Version)

First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu #65*, 1989

The blackness above was deep and unbroken. Rising into it was a tower with a single opening which framed a pale, quivering light. The aperture was fixed high within the darkness and was engulfed by its dense and voiceless unity. Spreading around the base of the tower was a scattering of much smaller lights shining here and there in the lower darkness. One of these was a lamp set into a wall at the border of a fractured street. The lamp spread its glow upon the gray wall and upon two figures that stood motionless before it. No color in their tight, unblemished faces, no sign of breath under the dark covering of their forms: simple beings with long fingers and sharp features. Their gaze was clearly focused on a building across that fractured street, rigidly directed toward a certain window there. Every so often someone would peer out along the very edge of that window, though he never looked for more than a moment before retreating out of sight. And he occupied a room where everything seemed to tremble with shadows.

The shadows moved slowly, obscuring so many of the objects within the room and appearing to change the outlines of the simplest furnishings. Every shape was imposing itself on another shape, breeding a chaos of overlapping patterns. Sometimes the room itself became altered in its dimensions. Over the course of slow transformations it pushed outward

into a great abyss and squeezed inward to create a maze of passages.

The occupant of the room remained on his guard in these surroundings. Now he saw something hiding inside a shadow moving along the woodwork by the window, using the shadow as a mask. He nudged his foot against the wall, which felt as if it softly gave way to his touch. But there was nothing in the shadow, or nothing any longer. And when he reached out slowly and pulled the dangling cord of a light, it was not illumination that filled the room but a voice.

"Mister Ha-ha!" it shrieked, echoing into many voices around him.

"Ha-ha," repeated a similar voice.

With lethargic caution he slid toward the window and peeked around the casement. He could not imagine that those keen and jagged voices belonged to the two figures across the street. He had never seen them open their mouths when they called out to him with some improvised name. They only stood firm and watchful by the high rough wall. He looked away.

"Mister Tick-tock!"

"Tick-tock, tick-tock."

He took another step, an intensely sluggish effort, and stood centered in the window frame. Now they would see him, now they would know. But the ones who had been so patient in their vigil had abandoned the scene. And shadows merged with fading echoes in the room.

Then there were new echoes for him to hear. Yet they did not lack definition or intent, as did so many of the sounds produced by the building that contained him: a dull, drawn-out crash or a brief crackling might come from anywhere

without giving up its origin or identity. But these new sounds, these particular echoes, did not seek anonymity. And there was a focus, a center upon which they converged. Footsteps, the creak of a closing window or a slowly opening door, a fumbling among the objects of another room, all these noises spoke a strange language among the surrounding shadows and joined with them in a greater scheme.

He began moving from room to room in a laborious expedition and became a fugitive in a realm of twisted suppositions. A window might allow some glaze of illumination, a glassy luminescence, but he was often confused by certain deviations in the design of these rooms. Forced to turn an unseen corner, he was faced with a small door, and around its edges some thin lines of light alternately appeared and disappeared in the darkness. He opened the door. On the other side was a long low corridor with a row of small lamps that together blinked on and off along either wall. He stood and stared. For it seemed that something came into being during the intervals of darkness in the corridor, a swarm of obscure shapes that were but imperfectly dispersed by the returning light, gnarled specters that somehow belonged to the very walls and reached out with their shapeless limbs. He crouched and then crossed his arms upon his chest, so that his body would not touch anything which need not be touched. When the light next filled the corridor he ran across the floor and felt himself being thrust forward, strangely propelled by a power which was not his own and which he could not control. A railing caught him before he plunged down a stairwell reaching into the blackness below.

Yet these flights of stairs, which from above described a perfect vertical shaft, soon began to wander. They led him

down into unfamiliar regions of the building without offering a means of escape, only of retreat. And when he paused a moment to survey the dark world without doors around him, he heard the echoing voices.

"Mister Fizzle," they shouted at him in unison.

He proceeded to descend the stairway and resigned himself to whatever destination it would lead him, always moving with that irresistible rapidity which had possessed his body and confused his thoughts. The echoes of other footsteps were now in pursuit. They appeared to catch up to him as small and barely visible objects, soft and irregular spheres that tumbled past him on the stairs and then faded before his eyes. Soon the others would be able to see him, soon they would reach him.

At last there came an end to the prodigious stairs, and he arrived at the abysmal fundament of the building. The ground upon which he now stood seemed to be of raw clay, cold and tallowy. Ahead of him was a crude hallway, nearly a tunnel, which dripped with something that gave off a grayish glow. And there were other hallways and also doors within the damp walls. It seemed he had no choice but to hide within one of these rooms. For upon that slippery ground he could no longer move with the same speed that had brought him there.

He turned down one corridor after another. By then the others were with him in those dim catacombs. It was time to take refuge behind one of the doors, each of which perfectly withheld the secret of whatever lay behind it.

The room in which he closed himself was lit by a dimmer light than that of the passages outside. It was an oily and erratic illumination which seemed to emerge from thick pools

and patches of corruption that mottled the greasy floor. An atmosphere of filth and decay occupied the room. Eventually he always wound up in such a place. There was no end to it. No way out. Everything was melting with rot, yet everything endured, infinite in age it seemed. He could not remember it being any other way. Go here, go there. Look for another place that was not like the one before. Someone must know something. He was about to seek a more tolerable sanctuary when two figures stepped out of some dark recess within the room.

"Mister Thump," one of them said without the slightest movement of his thin mouth. So it was not they who spoke, but something else which spoke through them, something which practiced a strange ventriloquism.

When he turned to try to escape through the door, he found that it was stuck, jammed within its frame by shadows clogging its edges, oozing out like black suet.

"Thump, thump, thump," whispered the voices approaching.

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An interval of oblivion passed, and it was an entirely different room in which he awoke. This was a small, bare cubicle lit only by a peculiar radiance which shone through a narrow slot in the large, locked door. There were no windows in the room. The floor felt gritty and vaguely shifted, as if it were being supported by loose sand. He lay against a wall in darkness, with only his thin legs jutting into the light shining through the slot in the door.

A voice was whispering to him from somewhere. Slowly the words gained force, yet somehow they remained an ab-

stract sound which merely flirted with sense, never really cohering. The voice seemed to be reaching him through the wall, for he was alone in that room. And still the tones were emphatic, even piercing, as if unaffected by the dulling interference of a barrier.

"Listen," the voice said. "Are you listening now? I am a prisoner here, and now that you have been brought to the tower so are you a prisoner. It was not always like this. Things have changed in this place since I first came here. What they were like before that I cannot say. I cannot remember what things were like for me. I can only believe that this is how it is for you. I know that you wonder about those ones who brought you here, and about other things. Are you listening? Someone made them, you know. *He* is the one who made them. He could do such things. And he did something else, something that he is still doing. For he never truly perished. Perhaps he will return, and when he does things will change again, because he has changed. How he originated this place and what his mad dreams are about is not for me to tell. Bones and shadows, are you listening? Pale bones and black shadows. And now he is gone but he is not gone. I know my voice is not the same, if you are listening. It is only an echo now. I have heard so many voices, and how could I not become their echo? The echo of dreams, dreams of bones and shadows together. Do you know the shadows I mean? They draw you toward them. They take you into their blackness. But that is where you would go. Something in the very bones reaches out to the shadows and their blackness. He dreamed about this, and he practiced this dream. The bones themselves are only timeworn shadows, the dust of shadows. Where they are gathered, so are

shadows gathered there. And they are dreamed together. Everything is the subject of shadows, everything serves them and their ends, which is all a mystery. The bones are silent because the shadows have taken their voices. He dreamed about this. Now we are all servants of shadows, and they have taken voices from the bones to join with their blackness. The shadows have taken these voices now. And they are using them, listen to my words. Things have changed but everything continues as he dreamed it would be, if only for the nightmare epoch in which we exist. Everything continues but is not the same. And I cannot say what is going to happen or when it will happen now that the shadows have taken voices from the bones to join with their blackness. I only wish it would all be over. It is too much. Who could dream of such—"

But the words were interrupted when the door groaned and swung slowly toward him, flooding his cell with a confusing radiance. In the open doorway were two figures which stood lean and dark and without features against the flaring incandescence. Yet they were not hindered by the brilliance and moved toward him with a mechanical efficiency. They positioned themselves on either side of his slouching form, then lifted him easily off the floor. He struggled awkwardly, at last gripping one of their pale hands and pulling on it. The skin slipped back from the wrist and bunched up like a glove. Underneath was revealed a kind of stuffing composed of pale chips and slivers that cohered within a thick black paste.

They brought him out into the narrow circular corridor, where the brightness of a multitude of hanging lamps eliminated any suggestion of shadows. He noticed, as he hung in

the grasp of the two servants, that the neighboring cell had its door wide open and was without an occupant. But when they began to proceed down the corridor there appeared to be something that moved upon the wall of that vacant cell, evading the light. They passed other cells, all of whose doors were open and all of which betrayed a stirring along the walls within that told him they were not wholly unoccupied.

His wordless escorts now pushed him through a peaked doorway cut into the gray inner wall of the corridor. On the other side was a stone stairway which twisted through the heart of the prison. He climbed the stairs slowly and stiffly with long-fingered hands guiding him. And now shadows appeared upon the bending wall, joining themselves into an unshapely creature, a chimerical guide that knew its way and led him to a place high above. There was no variation in the light around him, yet a sense of gradual darkening imposed itself on him with every ascending step. Now he was approaching some vast and massive source of the obscure, a great nexus of shadows, a birthplace and perhaps also a graveyard where things without substance waited, a realm of first and final dreams.

The stairs ended as they emerged through the floor at the center of a great room. And here a new species of illumination—a pale and grainy phosphorescence—could be seen spreading throughout the open space around them. This strange light appeared to emanate from several transparent vessels which were shaped like urns and had been randomly positioned upon the floor or atop objects various in size. Each of these containers seemed to be filled with a colorless, powdery substance from which a cold and wavering glow was sent forth. But this glow, this scintillating gloss, did not

reveal the surfaces of the room as much as it coated them with another surface, transfiguring what lay beneath.

For in that troubled glare everything lost the density and presence it might have possessed. Wide and lofty cabinets seemed to teeter, barely settled upon the uneven floor. The straight lines of tall shelves took on a slight tilt and threatened to disgorge the countless books so tenuously supported there. So many books were already scattered across the floor, their pages torn out and gathered in ragged heaps that might rise into the air at any moment. Located in a far section of the chamber was an armory of curious devices mounted upon the wall or suspended by wires, devices which could have been hallucinations, phantoms through which one's hand would pass on attempting to use them as they were designed to be used. And they seemed to have been designed for projects that involved rending and ripping, flaying and grinding. Yet all of these instruments apparently had lain idle for ages, displaying a corrosion which further removed them from their former substance and placed them in a category of phantasmal curiosities. Even the long low table about which these atrocious implements were congregated was dissolving with neglect.

Nevertheless, he was forced by his guardians to lie upon this coarse slab and be fettered by straps so decayed that he could easily tear them off. But the stern auxiliaries did not seem to be aware of the true condition of things. They continued to perform routine tasks that once may have had a purpose before being eclipsed by changes unknown to them. Through the brittle haze of that room he watched his keepers as they went about some dutiful business, picking up obscure debris lying about the table, remnants of an undertak-

ing long abandoned, or one no longer practiced in the same manner. This material they deposited in a large chest and locked it within. Then, with the studied automatism of pallbearers, they lifted the chest by its handles and carried it away, descending the stairs at the center of the room, their heavy feet scuffing the steps of that great prison tower. Where they were going he did not know, nor did he think it mattered.

With the labored movements of a sleeper prematurely awakened, he turned himself from the table. And it was then he saw that the room was provided with a window, a single opening without glass. But so filled was this aperture with the blackness beyond that it seemed to be only a shadow painted upon the wall. He stepped slowly about the mounds of paper and other waste lying on the floor, careful of the deceptions of the room's ruptured light, and leaned over the window's ledge. What a great distance it was to those structures which were crowded together along fractured streets below. Remaining at the window, he gazed into the great blackness above, which seemed to exert a strange magnetism, a tugging at the tower that rose so near to this mute and lightless firmament. After a few moments he turned away from the window. Now he was alone, with nothing to hold him to that place.

But as he moved toward the stairs to leave, he paused and scrutinized the piles of disjecta about him. Among this scattering of odds and ends there appeared to be something like bones or pieces of bones, broken leavings of some enterprise that had taken place here. And there was also such an abundance of jettisoned paper, pages dark with scribbling and sloughed off in the chaos of composition. Yet as he stud-

ied with greater intentness this mass of wild marks, he began to receive a few splinters of its theme, to read the wreckage of an unknown adventure. He seemed to see phrases, incantations, formulae, and almost to hear them spoken by a shattered voice. *The pact of bones and blackness*, the voice declaimed. *The collection of shadows… shadows binding bones… skeletons becoming shadows*. And he came to understand other things: *the land stripped of flesh… the reeking earth ripped clean and rising into the great blackness*. This reverberant discourse had made him its student, imparting theories and practice: *bones pummeled into purity… parts turned to brilliant particles… the shadows seeded with the voice of skulls… the many voices within eternal blackness… the tenebrous harmony.*

Somehow these words were summoning him through a voice in his bones. Now he was with them. And he fought against the shadows as they sought his bones and the bones he sensed everywhere around him. There was an echoing clamor of shrieking multitudes—a world the originator had left to run on its own until his return, a tick-tock world where the work begun in the tower would continue. Would these bones always be in the grip of shadows and the blackness? Could they reach somewhere else… or perhaps nowhere? Like his fellow prisoner in the tower, he now wished it would all be over.

It was then that he heard the voice in the bones speak of something different than it had before. What it told him was not the hopelessness of being shackled to this world. Instead, the voice awoke in him the memory of another time or another place that had not been so abused by changes. Nothing of the kind had ever entered his thoughts, so far as

he could recall. That he now conceived of such a thing could have been due to his reading of the words of the originator, who might not have been the originator at all but also a prisoner from another time or another place—a time and place before the existence of this world, or any world. *The pact of bones and blackness. Skeletons becoming shadows. The eternal blackness.* Maybe there was a way out. And the originator had discovered the ultimate change by which he could leave all changes and never return. Not an unending existence of changes but a changeless oblivion. To all appearances, there had been someone who knew something: of all the principles which composed anything that could be called a world, somehow this one had been overlooked or forgotten. Everything seemed it would never end. The thought itself had been obliterated in the minds of everyone he met, and in his own mind. Once it had been a fearful thought, something to be changed—non-being. Over eons the fear had been eradicated, and then the thought itself. But the initiator, with his incantations and formulae had recovered the secret of the voice in the bones. And those who knew them lost the invulnerable condition they had evolved, the awful state of the perpetual. Joyous of his new-found mortality, he walked to the window and bounded across its ledge. Now it was over for him. One day it would be over for all, that terrible dream of everlasting changes that held us to a place that never should have been if its greatest intention led only to wallowing in the muck of eternity.

The Voice In The Bones (1994 Noctuary Version)

First published in *Crypt Of Cthulhu #65*, 1989

The blackness above was deep and unbroken. Rising toward it was a tower with a single opening which framed a pale, quivering light. The narrow aperture was fixed high within the darkness and was engulfed by its dense and voiceless unity. Below the tower was a scattering of other structures, while other lights emerged here and there in the lower darkness. One of these was a lamp set into a wall at the border of a fractured street. The lamp spread its glow upon the gray wall and upon two figures who stood motionless before it. No color in their tight, unblemished faces, no sign of breath under the dark covering of their forms: simple beings with long fingers and empty eyes. Yet their gaze was clearly focused on a building across that vacant street, rigidly directed toward a certain window there. Every so often someone would peer out along the very edge of that window, though he never looked for more than a moment before retreating out of sight. And he occupied a room where everything seemed to tremble with shadows.

The shadows moved slowly, obscuring so many of the objects within the room and appearing to change the outlines of the simplest furnishings. The room itself became altered in its dimensions. Over the course of slow transformations it pushed outward into a great abyss and squeezed inward to create a maze of strange black turnings. Every shape was im-

posing itself on another shape, breeding a chaos of overlapping patterns.

The occupant of the room remained on his guard in these surroundings. Now he saw something hiding inside a shadow moving along the woodwork by the window, using the shadow as a mask. He nudged his foot against the wall, which felt as if it softly gave way to his touch. But there was nothing in the shadow, or nothing any longer. And when he reached out slowly and pulled the dangling cord of a light, it was not illumination that filled the room but a voice.

"Mister Ha-ha!" it shrieked, echoing into many voices around him.

"Ha-ha," repeated a similar voice.

With lethargic caution he slid toward the window and peeked around the casement. He could not imagine that those keen and jagged voices belonged to the two figures across the street. He had never seen them open their mouths when they called out to him with some improvised name. They only stood firm and watchful by the high rough wall. He looked away.

"Mister Tick-tock!"

"Tick-tock, tick-tock."

He took another step, an intensely sluggish effort, and stood centered in the window frame. Now they would see him, now they would know. But the ones who had been so patient in their vigil had abandoned the scene. And shadows merged with fading echoes in the room.

Then there were new echoes for him to hear. Yet they did not lack definition or intent, as did so many of the sounds produced by the large building that contained him: a dull drawn-out crash or a brief crackling might come from any-

where without giving up its origin or identity. But these new sounds, these particular echoes, did not seek anonymity. And there was a focus, a center upon which they converged. Footsteps, the creak of a closing window or a slowly opening door, a fumbling among the objects of another room, all these noises spoke a strange language among the surrounding shadows and joined with them in a greater scheme.

He began moving from room to room in a laborious expedition and became a fugitive in a realm of twisted suppositions. A window might allow some glaze of illumination, a glassy luminescence, but he was often confused by certain deviations in the design of these rooms. Forced to turn an unseen corner, he was faced with a small door, and around its edges some thin lines of light alternately appeared and disappeared in the darkness. He opened the door. On the other side was a long low corridor with a row of small lamps that together blinked on and off along either wall. He stood and stared. For it seemed that something came into being during the intervals of darkness in the corridor, a swarm of obscure shapes that were but imperfectly dispersed by the returning light, gnarled specters that somehow belonged to the very walls and reached out with their shapeless limbs. He crouched and then crossed his arms upon his chest, so that his body would not touch anything which need not be touched. When the light next filled the corridor he ran across the floor and felt himself being thrust forward, strangely propelled by a power which was not his own and which he could not control. A railing caught him before he plunged down a stairwell reaching into the blackness below.

Yet these flights of stairs, which from above described a perfect vertical shaft, soon began to wander. They led him

into unfamiliar regions of the building without offering a means of escape, only of retreat. And when he paused a moment to survey the dark and doorless world around him, he heard the echoing voices.

"Mister Fizzle," they shouted at him in unison.

He proceeded to descend the stairway and resigned himself to whatever destination it would lead him, always moving with that irresistible rapidity which had possessed his body and confused his thoughts. The echoes of other footsteps were now in pursuit. They appeared to catch up to him as small and barely visible objects, soft and irregular spheres that tumbled past him on the stairs and then faded before his eyes. Soon the others would be able to see him, soon they would reach him.

At last there came an end to the prodigious stairs, and he arrived at the abysmal fundament of the building. The ground upon which he now stood seemed to be of raw clay, cold and tallowy. Ahead of him was a crude passage, nearly a tunnel, which dripped with something that gave off a grayish glow. And there were other passages and also doors within the damp walls. It seemed he had no choice but to hide within one of these rooms. For upon that slippery ground he could no longer move with the same speed that had brought him there.

He turned down one passageway after another. By then the others were with him in those dim catacombs. It was time to take refuge behind one of the doors, each of which perfectly withheld the secret of whatever lay behind it.

The room in which he closed himself was lit by a dimmer light than that of the passages outside. It was an oily and erratic illumination which seemed to emerge from thick pools

and patches of corruption that mottled the greasy clay of the floor. An atmosphere of filth and decay occupied the room, a rank presence that was the soul of slaughter. Indefinite in its dimensions, the chamber seemed to be a place of disposal for a kind of fleshy refuse. He was about to seek a more tolerable sanctuary when two figures stepped out of some dark recess within the room.

"Mister Thump," one of them said without the slightest movement of his thin mouth. So it was not they who spoke, but something else which spoke through them, something which practiced a strange ventriloquism.

When he turned to try and escape through the door, he found that it was stuck, jammed within its frame by shadows clogging its edges, oozing out like black suet.

"Thump, thump, thump," whispered the voices approaching him.

***

An interval of oblivion passed, and it was an entirely different room in which he awoke. This was a small, bare cubicle lit only by a peculiar radiance which shone through a narrow slot in the large, locked door. There were no windows in the room. The floor felt gritty and vaguely shifting, as if he were being supported by very loose sand. He lay against a wall in darkness, with only his thin legs projecting into the strip of light cast upon the floor.

A voice was whispering to him from somewhere. Slowly the words gained force, yet somehow they remained an abstract sound which merely flirted with messages, never really cohering. The voice seemed to be reaching him through the wall, for he was alone in that room. And still

the tones were emphatic, even piercing, as if unaffected by the dulling interference of a barrier.

"Listen," the voice said. "Are you listening now? I am also a prisoner, but it is not the same for me. Things have changed in this place. I know that you wonder about those ones who brought you here, and about other things. Are you listening? Someone made them, you know. He is the one who made them, he could do such things. And he did something else, something that he is still doing. For he could never truly perish. Things have changed since he came to this place. He came here with strange dreams, and things began to change. He hid himself here and practiced his dreams. Bones and shadows, are you listening? Pale bones and black shadows. And now he is gone but he is not gone. I know my voice is not the same, if you are listening. It is only an echo now. I have heard so many voices, and how could I not become their echo? The echo of dreams, dreams of bones and shadows together. Do you know the shadows I mean? They draw you toward them, they take you into their blackness. But that is where you would go. Something in the very bones reaches out to the shadows and their blackness. He dreamed about this, and he practiced this dream. The bones themselves are only pale shadows, the dust of shadows. Where they are gathered, so are shadows gathered there. And they are dreamed together. These dreams have not gone from this place. Everything is the subject of shadows, everything serves them and their blackness. The bones are silent because the shadows have taken their voices. He dreamed about this. Now we are all servants of shadows, and they have taken voices from the bones to join with their blackness. The shadows have taken these voices now. And

they are using them, listen to my words. Things have changed but everything continues as he dreamed it would be. Everything continues but is not the same. And are you…"

But the words were interrupted when the door groaned and swung slowly toward him, flooding his cell with a confusing radiance. In the open doorway were two figures which stood lean and dark and without features against the flaring incandescence. Yet they were not hindered by the brilliance and moved toward him with a mechanical efficiency. They positioned themselves on either side of his slouching form, then lifted him easily off the floor. He struggled awkwardly, at last gripping one of their pale hands and pulling on it. The skin slipped back from the wrist and bunched up like a glove; underneath was revealed a kind of stuffing composed of pale chips and slivers that cohered within a thick black paste.

They brought him out into the narrow circular corridor, where the brightness of a multitude of hanging lamps eliminated any suggestion of shadows. He noticed, as he hung in the grasp of the two servants, that the neighboring cell had its door wide open and was without an occupant. But when they began to proceed down the corridor there appeared to be something that moved upon the wall of that vacant cell, evading the light. They passed other cells, all of whose doors were open and all of which betrayed a stirring along the walls within that told him they were not wholly unoccupied.

His wordless escorts now pushed him through a peaked doorway cut into the gray inner wall of the corridor. On the other side was a stone stairway which twisted through the heart of the prison. He climbed the stairs slowly and stiffly with long-fingered hands guiding him. And now shadows

appeared upon the bending wall, joining themselves into an unshapely creature, a chimerical guide that knew its way and led him to a place high above. There was no variation in the light around him, yet a sense of gradual darkening imposed itself on him with every ascending step. Now he was approaching some vast and massive source of the obscure, a great nexus of shadows, a birthplace and perhaps also a graveyard where things without substance waited, a realm of first and final dreams.

The stairs ended as they emerged through the floor at the center of a great room. And here a new species of illumination—a pale and grainy phosphorescence—could be seen spreading throughout the open space around them. This strange light appeared to emanate from several transparent vessels which were shaped like urns and had been randomly positioned upon the floor or atop objects various in size. Each of these containers seemed to be filled with a colorless, powdery substance from which a cold and gritty glow was sent forth. But this glow, this scintillating gloss, did not reveal the surfaces of the room as much as it coated them with another surface, transfiguring what lay beneath.

For in that troubled glare everything lost the density and presence it might have possessed. Wide and lofty cabinets seemed to waver, barely settled upon the uneven floor. The straight lines of tall shelves took on a slight tilt and threatened to disgorge the countless books so tenuously supported there. So many books were already scattered across the floor, their pages torn out and gathered in ragged heaps that might take themselves into the air at any moment. Located in a far section of the chamber was an armory of curious devices mounted upon the wall or suspended by wires,

devices which could have been hallucinations, phantoms through which one's hand would pass on attempting to use them as they were designed to be used. And they seemed to have been designed for projects that involved rending and ripping, flaying and grinding. Yet all of these instruments apparently had lain idle for ages, displaying a corrosion which further removed them from their former substance and placed them in a category of phantasmal curiosities. Even the long low table about which these atrocious implements were congregated was dissolving with neglect.

Nevertheless, he was forced by his guardians to lie upon this coarse slab and be fettered by straps so decayed that he could easily tear them off. But the stern auxiliaries did not seem to be aware of the true condition of things: they continued to perform routine tasks that once may have had a purpose before being eclipsed by changes unknown to them.

Through the brittle haze of that room he watched his keepers as they went about some dutiful business, picking up obscure debris lying about the table, remnants of an undertaking long abandoned, or one no longer practiced in the same manner. This material they deposited in a large chest and locked it within. Then, with the studied automatism of pallbearers, they lifted the chest by its handles and carried it away, descending the stairs at the center of the room, their heavy feet scuffing the steps of that great prison tower. And echoes diminished in the depths below.

With the labored movements of a sleeper prematurely awakened, he turned himself from the table. And it was then he saw that the room was provided with a window, a single opening without glass. But so filled was this aperture with the blackness beyond that it seemed to be only a shadow

painted upon the wall. He stepped slowly about—the mounds of paper and other waste lying about the floor, careful of the deceptions of the room's fractured light, and leaned over the window's ledge. Far below he could see two tiny figures with a miniature box bobbing between them. They shrank farther into the quiet distance and finally disappeared into one of those dark hulking structures which were crowded together along narrow streets. So alike were these buildings that he could not keep his fix on the one they had entered, though he had his suspicions. Remaining at the window, he gazed into the great blackness above, which seemed to exert a strange magnetism, a tugging at the tower that rose so near to this mute and lightless firmament. After a few moments he turned away from the window. Now he was alone, with nothing to hold him to that place.

But as he moved toward the stairs to leave, he paused and scrutinized the piles of disjecta about him. Among this scattering of odds and ends there appeared to be something like bones or pieces of bones, broken leavings of some enterprise that had taken place here. And there was also such an abundance of jettisoned paper, pages dark with scribbling and sloughed off in the chaos of composition. Yet as he studied with greater intentness this mass of wild marks, he began to receive a few splinters of its theme, to read the wreckage of an unknown adventure. He seemed to see phrases, incantations, formulae, and almost to hear them spoken by a shattered voice. The pact of bones and blackness, the voice declaimed to him. The collection of shadows... shadows binding bones... skeletons becoming shadows. And he came to understand other things: the land stripped of flesh... the reeking earth ripped clean and rising

into the great blackness. This reverberant discourse had made him its student, imparting theories and practice: bones pummeled into purity… parts turned to brilliant particles… the shadows seeded with the voice of skulls… the many voices within eternal blackness… the tenebrous harmony.

At last he turned his eyes from these words that were not words. Trying to draw away from them, he stumbled toward the stairs. But the voice which spoke these things continued to speak to him. It then became many voices speaking. Things had already begun to change. And now the stairs descended only into blackness, a blackness that was rising into the room as a great shadow around him. Shadows and their blackness and the voices they possessed. The one who had dreamed of bones and shadows—bones and shadows together—spoke in these voices and knew the name to speak, the name that would flay the flesh, the true name that called its bearer into the shadows as folds of blackness fell upon him and wrapped him in their shroud.

Now they had summoned him, now he was with them. Things had changed yet everything continued as before. And he cried out as the shadow sought his bones and as he felt his bones reaching into the blackness. Yet it was no longer his own voice that sounded in the tower, but the echoing clamor of strange shrieking multitudes.

The Last Feast of Harlequin (2011 Grimscribe Version)

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My interest in the town of Mirocaw was first aroused when I heard that an annual festival was held there which, among its other elements of pageantry, featured the participation of clowns. A former colleague of mine, who is now attached to the anthropology department of a distant university, had read one of my recent articles ("The Clown Figure in American Media," *Journal of Popular Culture*), and wrote to me that he vaguely remembered reading about or being told of a town somewhere in the state that held a kind of "Fool's Feast" every year, thinking that this might be pertinent to my peculiar line of study. It was, of course, more pertinent than he had reason to think, both to my academic aims in this area and to my personal pursuits.

Aside from my teaching, I had for some years been engaged in various anthropological projects with the primary ambition of articulating the significance of the clown figure in diverse cultural contexts. Every year for the past twenty years I have attended the pre-Lenten festivals that are held in various places throughout the southern United States. Every year I learned something more concerning the esoterics of celebration. In these studies I was an eager participant —along with playing my part as an anthropologist, I also took a place behind the clownish mask myself. And I cherished this role as I did nothing else in my life. To me the title

of Clown has always carried connotations of a noble sort. I was an adroit jester, strangely enough, and had always taken pride in the skills I worked so diligently to develop.

I wrote to the State Department of Recreation, indicating what information I desired and exposing an enthusiastic urgency which came naturally to me on this topic. Many weeks later I received a tan envelope imprinted with a government logo. Inside was a pamphlet that catalogued all of the various seasonal festivities of which the state was officially aware, and I noted in passing that there were as many in late autumn and winter as in the warmer seasons. A letter inserted within the pamphlet explained to me that, according to their voluminous records, no festivals held in the town of Mirocaw had been officially registered. Their files, nonetheless, could be placed at my disposal if I should wish to research this or similar matters in connection with some definite project. At the time this offer was made I was already laboring under so many professional and personal burdens that, with a weary hand, I simply deposited the envelope and its contents in a drawer, never to be consulted again.

Some months later, however, I made an impulsive digression from my responsibilities and, rather haphazardly, took up the Mirocaw project. This happened as I was driving north one afternoon in late summer with the intention of examining some journals in the holdings of a library at another university. Once out of the city limits the scenery changed to sunny fields and farms, diverting my thoughts from the signs that I passed along the highway. Nevertheless, the subconscious scholar in me must have been regarding these with studious care. The name of a town loomed into my vision. Instantly the scholar retrieved certain re-

cords from some deep mental drawer, and I was faced with making a few hasty calculations as to whether there was enough time and motivation for an investigative side trip. But the exit sign was even hastier in making its appearance, and I soon found myself leaving the highway, recalling the road sign's promise that the town was no more than seven miles east.

These seven miles included several confusing turns, the forced taking of a temporarily alternate route, and a destination not even visible until a steep rise had been fully ascended. On the descent another helpful sign informed me that I was within the city limits of Mirocaw. Some scattered houses on the outskirts of the town were the first structures I encountered. Beyond them the numerical highway became Townshend Street, the main avenue of Mirocaw.

The town impressed me as being much larger once I was within its limits than it had appeared from the prominence just outside. I saw that the general hilliness of the surrounding countryside was also an internal feature of Mirocaw. Here, though, the effect was different. The parts of the town did not look as if they adhered very well to one another. This condition might be blamed on the irregular topography of the town. Behind some of the old stores in the business district, steeply roofed houses had been erected on a sudden incline, their peaks appearing at an extraordinary elevation above the lower buildings. And because the foundations of these houses could not be glimpsed, they conveyed the illusion of being either precariously suspended in air, threatening to topple down, or else constructed with an unnatural loftiness in relation to their width and mass. This situation also created a weird distortion of perspective. The two levels

of structures overlapped each other without giving a sense of depth, so that the houses, because of their higher elevation and nearness to the foreground buildings, did not appear diminished in size as background objects should. Consequently, a look of flatness, as in a photograph, predominated in this area. Indeed, Mirocaw could be compared to an album of old snapshots, particularly ones in which the camera had been upset in the process of photography, causing the pictures to develop on an angle: a cone-roofed turret, like a pointed hat jauntily askew, peeked over the houses on a neighboring street; a billboard displaying a group of grinning vegetables tipped its contents slightly westward; cars parked along steep curbs seemed to be flying skyward in the glare-distorted windows of a five-and-ten; people leaned lethargically as they trod up and down sidewalks; and on that sunny day a clock tower, which at first I mistook for a church steeple, cast a long shadow that seemed to extend an impossible distance and wander into unlikely places in its progress across the town. I should say that perhaps the disharmonies of Mirocaw are more acutely affecting my imagination in retrospect than they were on that first day, when I was primarily concerned with locating the city hall or some other center of information.

I pulled around a corner and parked. Sliding over to the other side of the seat, I rolled down the window and called to a passerby: “Excuse me, sir.” The man, who was shabbily dressed and very old, paused for a moment without approaching the car. Though he had apparently responded to my call, his vacant expression did not betray the least awareness of my presence, and for a moment I thought it just a coincidence that he halted on the sidewalk at the same time I

addressed him. His eyes were focused somewhere beyond me with a weary and imbecilic gaze. After a few moments he continued on his way and I said nothing to call him back, even though at the last second his face began to appear dimly familiar. Someone else finally came along who was able to direct me to the Mirocaw City Hall and Community Center.

The city hall turned out to be the building with the clock tower. Inside I stood at a counter behind which some people were working at desks and walking up and down a back hallway. On one wall was a poster for the state lottery: a jack-in-the-box with both hands grasping green bills. After a few moments, a tall, middle-aged woman came over to the counter.

“Can I help you?” she asked in a neutral, bureaucratic voice.

I explained that I had heard about the festival—saying nothing about being a nosy academic—and asked if she could provide me with further information or direct me to someone who could.

“Do you mean the one held in the winter?” she asked.

“How many of them are there?”

“Just that one.”

“I suppose, then, that that's the one I mean.” I smiled as if sharing a joke with her.

Without another word, she walked off into the back hallway. While she was absent I exchanged glances with several of the people behind the counter who periodically looked up from their work.

“There you are,” she said when she returned, handing me a piece of paper that looked like the product of a cheap copy

machine. *Please Come to the Fun*, it said in large letters. *Parades*, it went on, *Street Masquerade*, *Bands*, *The Winter Raffle*, and *The Coronation of the Winter Queen*. The page continued with the mention of a number of miscellaneous festivities. I read the words again. There was something about that imploring little "please" at the top of the announcement that made the whole affair seem like a charity function.

"When is it held? It doesn't say when the festival takes place."

"Most people already know that." She abruptly snatched the page from my hands and wrote something at the bottom. When she gave it back to me, I saw "Dec. 19-21" written in blue-green ink. I was immediately struck by an odd sense of scheduling on the part of the festival committee. There was, of course, solid anthropological and historical precedent for holding festivities around the winter solstice, but the timing of this particular event did not seem entirely practical.

"If you don't mind my asking, don't these days somewhat conflict with the regular holiday season? I mean, most people have enough going on at that time."

"It's just tradition," she said, as if invoking some venerable
ancestry behind her words.

"That's very interesting," I said as much to myself as to her.

"Is there anything else?" she asked.

"Yes. Could you tell me if this festival has anything to do with clowns? I see there's something about a masquerade."

"Yes, of course there are some people in... costumes. I've never been in that position myself... that is, yes, there are clowns of a sort."

At that point my interest was definitely aroused, but I was not sure how much further I wanted to pursue it. I thanked the woman for her help and asked the best means of access to the highway, not anxious to retrace the labyrinthine route by which I had entered the town. I walked back to my car with a whole flurry of half-formed questions, and as many vague and conflicting answers, cluttering my mind.

The directions the woman gave me necessitated passing through the south end of Mirocaw. There were not many people moving about in this section of town. Those that I did see, shuffling lethargically down a block of battered storefronts, exhibited the same sort of forlorn expression and manner as the old man from whom I had asked directions earlier. I must have been traversing a central artery of this area, for on either side stretched street after street of poorly tended yards and houses bowed with age and indifference. When I came to a stop at a streetcorner, one of the citizens of this slum passed in front of my car. This lean, morose, and epicene person turned my way and sneered outrageously with a taut little mouth, yet seemed to be looking at no one in particular. After progressing a few streets farther, I came to a road that led back to the highway. I felt detectably more comfortable as soon as I found myself traveling once again through the expanses of sun-drenched farmlands.

I reached the library with more than enough time for my research, and so I decided to make a scholarly detour to see what material I could find that might illuminate the winter festival held in Mirocaw. The library, one of the oldest in the state, included in its holdings the entire run of the Mirocaw *Courier*. I thought this would be an excellent place to start. I

soon found, however, that there was no handy way to research information from this newspaper, and I did not want to engage in a blind search for articles concerning a specific subject.

I next turned to the more organized resources of the newspapers for the larger cities located in the same county, which incidentally shares its name with Mirocaw. I uncovered very little about the town, and almost nothing concerning its festival, except in one general article on annual events in the area that erroneously attributed to Mirocaw a "large Middle-Eastern community" which every spring hosted a kind of ethnic jamboree. From what I had already observed, and from what I subsequently learned, the citizens of Mirocaw were solidly Midwestern-American, the probable descendants in a direct line from some enterprising pack of New Englanders of the last century. There was one brief item devoted to a Mirocavian event, but this merely turned out to be an obituary notice for an old woman who had quietly taken her life around Christmastime. Thus, I returned home that day all but empty-handed on the subject of Mirocaw.

However, it was not long afterward that I received another letter from the former colleague of mine who had first led me to seek out Mirocaw and its festival. As it happened, he rediscovered the article that caused him to stir my interest in a local "Fool's Feast." This article had its sole appearance in an obscure festschrift of anthropology studies published in Amsterdam twenty years before. Most of these papers were in Dutch, a few in German, and only one was in English: "The Last Feast of Harlequin: Preliminary Notes on a Local Festival." It was exciting, of course, finally to be able

to read this study, but even more exciting was the name of its author: Dr. Raymond Thoss.

2.

Before proceeding any further, I should mention something about Thoss, and inevitably about myself. Over two decades ago, at my alma mater in Cambridge, Mass., Thoss was a professor of mine. Long before playing a role in the events I am about to describe, he was already one of the most important figures in my life. A striking personality, he inevitably influenced everyone who came in contact with him. I remember his lectures on social anthropology, how he turned that dim room into a brilliant and profound circus of learning. He moved in an uncannily brisk manner. When he swept his arm around to indicate some common term on the blackboard behind him, one felt he was presenting nothing less than an item of fantastic qualities and secret value. When he replaced his hand in the pocket of his old jacket this fleeting magic was once again stored away in its well-worn pouch, to be retrieved at the sorcerer's discretion. We sensed he was teaching us more than we could possibly learn, and that he himself was in possession of greater and deeper knowledge than he could possibly impart. On one occasion I summoned up the audacity to offer an interpretation—which was somewhat opposed to his own—regarding the tribal clowns of the Hopi Indians. I implied that personal experience as an amateur clown and special devotion to this study provided me with an insight possibly more valuable than his own. It was then he disclosed, casually and very obiter dicta, that he had actually acted in the role of one of these masked tribal fools and had celebrated with them the

dance of the *kachinas*. In revealing these facts, however, he somehow managed not to add to the humiliation I had already inflicted upon myself. And for this I was grateful to him.

Thoss's activities were such that he sometimes became the object of gossip or romanticized speculation. He was a fieldworker par excellence, and his ability to insinuate himself into exotic cultures and situations, thereby gaining insights where other anthropologists merely collected data, was renowned. At various times in his career there had been rumors of his having "gone native" à la the Frank Hamilton Cushing legend. There were hints, which were not always irresponsible or cheaply glamorized, that he was involved in projects of a freakish sort, many of which focused on New England. It is a fact that he spent six months posing as a mental patient at an institution in western Massachusetts, gathering information on the "culture" of the psychically disturbed. When his book *Winter Solstice: The Longest Night of a Society* was published, the general opinion was that it was disappointingly subjective and impressionistic, and that, aside from a few moving but "poetically obscure" observations, there was nothing at all to give it value. Those who defended Thoss claimed he was a kind of super-anthropologist: while much of his work emphasized his own mind and feelings, his experience had in fact penetrated to a rich core of hard data which he had yet to disclose in objective discourse. As a student of Thoss, I tended to support this latter estimation of him. For a variety of tenable and untenable reasons, I believed Thoss capable of unearthing hitherto inaccessible strata of human existence. So it was gratifying at first that this article entitled "The Last Feast of Harlequin" seemed to

uphold the Thoss mystique, and in an area I personally found captivating.

Much of the content of the article I did not immediately comprehend, given its author's characteristic and often strategic obscurities. On first reading, the most interesting aspect of this brief study—the "notes" encompassed only twenty pages—was the general mood of the piece. Thoss's eccentricities were definitely present in these pages, but only as a struggling inner force which was definitely contained—incarcerated, I might say—by the somber rhythmic movements of his prose and by some gloomy references he occasionally called upon. Two references in particular shared a common theme. One was a quotation from Poe's "The Conqueror Worm," which Thoss employed as a rather sensational epigraph. The point of the epigraph, however, was nowhere echoed in the text of the article save in another passing reference. Thoss brought up the well-known genesis of the modern Christmas celebration, which of course descends from the Roman Saturnalia. Then, making it clear he had not yet observed the Mirocaw festival and had only gathered its nature from various informants, he established that it too contained many, even more overt, elements of the Saturnalia. Next he made what seemed to me a trivial and purely linguistic observation, one that had less to do with his main course of argument than it did with the equally peripheral Poe epigraph. He briefly mentioned that an early sect of the Syrian Gnostics called themselves "Saturnians" and believed, among other religious heresies, that mankind was created by angels who were in turn created by the Supreme Unknown. The angels, however, did not possess the power to make their creation an erect being and for a time it

crawled upon the earth like a worm. Eventually, the Creator remedied this grotesque state of affairs. At the time I supposed that the symbolic correspondences of mankind's origins and ultimate condition being associated with worms, combined with a year-end festival recognizing the winter death of the earth, was the gist of this Thossian "insight," a poetic but scientifically valueless observation.

Other observations he made on the Mirocaw festival were also strictly etic; in other words, they were based on secondhand sources, hearsay testimony. Even at that juncture, however, I felt Thoss knew more than he disclosed; and, as I later discovered, he had indeed included information on certain aspects of Mirocaw suggesting he was already in possession of several keys which for the moment he was keeping securely in his own pocket. By then I, too, possessed a most revealing morsel of knowledge. A note to the "Harlequin" article apprised the reader that the piece was only a fragment in rude form of a more wide-ranging work in preparation. This work was never seen by the world. My former professor had not published anything since his withdrawal from academic circulation some twenty years ago. Now I suspected where he had gone.

For the man I had stopped on the streets of Mirocaw and from whom I tried to obtain directions, the man with the disconcertingly lethargic gaze, had very much resembled a superannuated version of Dr. Raymond Thoss.

3.

And now I have a confession to make. Despite my reasons for being enthusiastic about Mirocaw and its mysteries, especially its relationship to both Thoss and my own deepest

concerns as a scholar—I contemplated the days ahead of me with no more than a feeling of frigid numbness and often with a sense of profound depression. Yet I had no reason to be surprised at this emotional state, which had little relevance to the outward events in my life but was determined by inward conditions that worked according to their own, quite enigmatic, seasons and cycles. For many years, at least since my university days, I have suffered from this dark malady, this recurrent despondency in which I would become buried when it came time for the earth to grow cold and bare and the skies heavy with shadows. Nevertheless, I pursued my plans, though somewhat mechanically, to visit Mirocaw during its festival days, for I superstitiously hoped that this activity might diminish the weight of my seasonal despair. In Mirocaw would be parades and parties and the opportunity to play the clown once again.

For weeks in advance I practiced my art, even perfecting a new feat of juggling magic, which was my special forte in foolery. I had my costumes cleaned, purchased fresh makeup, and was ready. I received permission from the university to cancel some of my classes prior to the holiday, explaining the nature of my project and the necessity of arriving in the town a few days before the festival began, in order to do some preliminary research, establish informants, and so on. Actually, my plan was to postpone any formal inquiry until after the festival and to involve myself beforehand as much as possible in its activities. I would, of course, keep a journal during this time.

There was one resource I did want to consult, however. Specifically, I returned to that outstate library to examine those issues of the Mirocaw *Courier* dating from December

two decades ago. One story in particular confirmed a point Thoss made in the “Harlequin” article, though the event it chronicled must have taken place after Thoss had written his study.

The *Courier* story appeared two weeks after the festival had ended for that year and was concerned with the disappearance of a woman named Elizabeth Beadle, the wife of Samuel Beadle, a hotel owner in Mirocaw. The county authorities speculated that this was another instance of the “holiday suicides” which seemed to occur with inordinate seasonal regularity in the Mirocaw region. Thoss documented this phenomenon in his “Harlequin” article, though I suspect that today these deaths would be neatly categorized under the heading “seasonal affective disorder.” In any case, the authorities searched a half-frozen lake near the outskirts of Mirocaw where they had found many successful suicides in years past. This year, however, no body was discovered. Alongside the article was a picture of Elizabeth Beadle. Even in the grainy microfilm reproduction one could detect a certain vibrancy and vitality in Mrs. Beadle's face. That a hypothesis of “holiday suicide” should be so readily posited to explain her disappearance seemed strange and in some way unjust.

Thoss, in his brief article, wrote that every year changes occurred of a moral or spiritual cast which seemed to affect Mirocaw along with the usual winter metamorphosis. He was not precise about its origin or nature but stated, in typically mystifying fashion, that the effect of this “subseason” on the town was conspicuously negative. In addition to the number of suicides actually accomplished during this time, there was also a rise in treatment of “hypochondriacal” con-

ditions, which was how the medical men of twenty years past characterized these cases in discussions with Thoss. This state of affairs would gradually worsen and finally reach a climax during the days scheduled for the Mirocaw festival. Thoss speculated that given the secretive nature of small towns, the situation was probably even more intensely pronounced than casual investigation could reveal.

The connection between the festival and this insidious subseasonal climate in Mirocaw was a point on which Thoss did not come to any rigid conclusions. He did write, nevertheless, that these two “climatic aspects” had had a parallel existence in the town's history as far back as available records could document. A late nineteenth-century history of Mirocaw County speaks of the town by its original name of New Colstead, and castigates the townspeople for holding a “ribald and soulless feast” to the exclusion of normal Christmas observances. (Thoss comments that the historian had mistakenly fused two distinct aspects of the season, their actual relationship being essentially antagonistic.) The “Harlequin” article did not trace the festival to its earliest appearance (this may not have been possible), though Thoss emphasized the New England origins of Mirocaw's founders. The festival, therefore, was one imported from this region and could reasonably be extended at least a century; that is, if it had not been brought over from the Old World, in which case its roots would become indefinite until further research could be done. Surely Thoss's allusion to the Syrian Gnostics suggested the latter possibility could not entirely be ruled out.

But it seemed to be the festival's link to New England that nourished Thoss's speculations. He wrote of this patch of

geography as if it were an acceptable place to end the search. For him, the very words “New England” seemed to be stripped of all traditional connotations and had come to imply nothing less than a gateway to all lands, both known and suspected, and even to ages beyond the civilized history of the region. Having been educated partly in New England, I could somewhat understand this sentimental exaggeration, for indeed there are places that seem archaic beyond chronological measure, appearing to transcend relative standards of time and achieving a kind of absolute antiquity which cannot be logically fathomed. But how this vague suggestion related to a small town in the Midwest I could not imagine. Thoss himself observed that the residents of Mirocaw did not betray any mysteriously primitive consciousness. On the contrary, they appeared superficially unaware of the genesis of their winter merrymaking. That such a tradition had endured through the years, however, even eclipsing the conventional Christmas holiday, revealed a profound awareness of the festival's meaning and function.

I cannot deny that what I had learned about the Mirocaw festival inspired me with a trite sense of fate, especially given the involvement of such an important figure from my past as Thoss. It was the first time in my academic career that I knew myself to be better suited than anyone else to discern the true meaning of scattered data, even if I could only attribute this special authority to chance circumstances.

Nevertheless, as I sat in that library on a morning in mid-December I doubted for a moment the wisdom of setting out for Mirocaw rather than returning home, where the more familiar *rite de passage* of winter depression awaited me. My

original scheme was to avoid the cyclical blues the season held for me, but it seemed this was also a part of the history of Mirocaw, only on a much larger scale. My emotional instability, however, was exactly what qualified me most for the particular fieldwork ahead, though I did not take pride or consolation in the fact. And to retreat would have been to deny myself an opportunity that might never offer itself again. In retrospect, there seems to have been no fortuitous resolution to the decision I had to make. As it happened, I went ahead to the town.

4.

Just past noon, on December 18, I started driving toward Mirocaw. A blur of dull, earthen-colored scenery extended in every direction. The snowfalls of late autumn had been sparse, and only a few white patches appeared in the harvested fields along the highway. The clouds were gray and abundant. Passing by a stretch of forest, I noticed the black, ragged clumps of abandoned nests clinging to the twisted mesh of bare branches. I thought I saw black birds skittering over the road ahead, but they were only dead leaves and they flew into the air as I drove by.

I approached Mirocaw from the south, entering the town from the direction I had left it on my visit the previous summer. This took me once again through that part of town which seemed to exist on the wrong side of some great invisible barrier dividing the desirable sections of Mirocaw from the undesirable. As lurid as this district had appeared to me under the summer sun, in the thin light of that winter afternoon it degenerated into a pale phantom of itself. The frail stores and starved-looking houses suggested a borderline re-

gion between the material and nonmaterial worlds, with one sardonically wearing the mask of the other. I saw a few gaunt pedestrians who turned as I passed by, though seemingly not *because* I passed by, making my way up to the main street of Mirocaw.

Driving up the steep rise of Townshend Street, I found the sights there comparatively welcoming. The rolling avenues of the town were in readiness for the festival. Streetlights had their poles raveled with evergreen, the fresh boughs proudly conspicuous in a barren season. On the doors of many of the businesses on Townshend were holly wreaths, equally green but observably plastic. However, although there was nothing unusual in this traditional greenery of the season, it soon became apparent to me that Mirocaw had quite abandoned itself to this particular symbol of Yuletide. It was garishly in evidence everywhere. The windows of stores and houses were framed in green lights, green streamers hung down from storefront awnings, and the beacons of the Red Rooster Bar were peacock green floodlights. I supposed the residents of Mirocaw desired these decorations, but the effect was one of excess. An eerie emerald haze permeated the town, and faces looked slightly reptilian.

At the time I assumed that the prodigious evergreen, holly wreaths, and colored lights (if only of a single color) demonstrated an emphasis on the vegetable symbols of the Nordic Yuletide, which would inevitably be muddled into the winter festival of any northern country just as they had been adopted for the Christmas season. In his “Harlequin” article Thoss wrote of the pagan aspect of Mirocaw's festival, likening it to the ritual of a fertility cult, with probable connec-

tions to chthonic divinities at sometime in the past. But Thoss had mistaken, as I had, what was only part of the festival's significance for the whole.

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The hotel at which I had made reservations was located on Townshend. It was an old building of brown brick, with an arched doorway and a pathetic coping intended to convey an impression of neoclassicism. I found a parking space in front and left my suitcases in the car.

When I first entered the hotel lobby it was empty. I thought perhaps the Mirocaw festival would have attracted enough visitors to at least bolster the business of its only hotel, but it seemed I was mistaken. Tapping a little bell, I leaned on the desk and turned to look at a small, traditionally decorated Christmas tree on a table near the entranceway. It was complete with shiny, egg-fragile bulbs; miniature candy canes; flat, laughing Santas with arms wide; a star on top nodding awkwardly against the delicate shoulder of an upper branch; and colored lights that bloomed out of flower-shaped sockets. For some reason this seemed to me a sorry little piece.

“May I help you?” said a young woman arriving from a room adjacent to the lobby.

I must have been staring rather intently at her, for she looked away and seemed quite uneasy. I could hardly imagine what to say to her or how to explain what I was thinking. In person she immediately radiated a chilling brilliance of manner and expression. But if this woman had not committed suicide twenty years before, as the newspaper article had suggested, neither had she aged in that time.

“Sarah,” called a masculine voice from the invisible heights of a stairway. A tall, middle-aged man came down the steps. “I thought you were in your room,” said the man, whom I took to be Samuel Beadle. Sarah, not Elizabeth, Beadle glanced sideways in my direction to indicate to her father that she was conducting the business of the hotel. Beadle apologized to me, and then excused the two of them for a moment while they went off to one side to continue their exchange.

I smiled and pretended everything was normal, while trying to remain within earshot of their conversation. They spoke in tones that suggested their conflict was a familiar one: Beadle's overprotective concern with his daughter's whereabouts and Sarah's frustrated understanding of certain restrictions placed upon her. The conversation ended, and Sarah ascended the stairs, turning for a moment to give me a facial pantomime of apology for the unprofessional scene that had just taken place.

“Now, sir, what can I do for you?” Beadle asked, almost demanded.

“Yes, I have a reservation. Actually, I'm a day early, if that doesn't present a problem.” I gave the hotel the benefit of the doubt that its business might have been secretly flourishing.

“No problem at all, sir,” he said, presenting me with the registration form, and then a brass-colored key dangling from a plastic disc bearing the number 44.

“Luggage?”

“Yes, it's in my car.”

“I'll give you a hand with that.”

While Beadle was settling me in my fourth-floor room it seemed an opportune moment to broach the subject of the

festival, the holiday suicides, and perhaps, depending upon his reaction, the fate of his wife. I needed a respondent who had lived in the town for a good many years and who could enlighten me about the attitude of Mirocavians toward their season of sea-green lights.

"This is just fine," I said about the clean but somber room. "Nice view. I can see the bright green lights of Mirocaw just fine from up here. Is the town usually all decked out like this? For the festival, I mean."

"Yes, sir, for the festival," he replied mechanically.

"I imagine you'll probably be getting quite a few of us out-of-towners in the next couple days."

"Could be. Is there anything else?"

"Yes, there is. I wonder if you could tell me something about the festivities."

"Such as..."

"Well, you know, the clowns and so forth."

"Only clowns here are the ones that're... well, picked out, I
suppose you would say."

"I don't understand."

"Excuse me, sir. I'm very busy right now. Is there anything else?"

I could think of nothing at the moment to perpetuate our conversation. Beadle wished me a good stay and left.

I unpacked my suitcases. In addition to regular clothing I had also brought along some of the items from my clown's wardrobe. Beadle's comment that the clowns of Mirocaw were "picked out" left me wondering exactly what purpose these street masqueraders served in the festival. The clown figure has had so many meanings in different times and cul-

tures. The jolly, well-loved joker familiar to most people is actually but one aspect of this protean creature. Madmen, hunchbacks, amputees, and other abnormals were once considered natural clowns; they were elected to fulfill a comic role which could allow others to see them as ludicrous rather than as terrible reminders of the forces of disorder in the world. But sometimes a cheerless jester was required to draw attention to this same disorder, as in the case of King Lear's morbid and honest fool, who of course was eventually hanged, and so much for his clownish wisdom. Clowns have often had ambiguous and sometimes contradictory roles to play. Thus, I knew enough not to brashly jump into costume and cry out, “Here I am again!”

That first day in Mirocaw I did not stray far from the hotel. I read and rested for a few hours and then ate at a nearby diner. Through the window beside my table I watched the winter night turn the soft green glow of the town into a harsh and almost totally new color as it contrasted with the darkness. The streets of Mirocaw seemed to me unusually busy for a small town at evening. Yet it was not the kind of activity one normally sees before an approaching Christmas holiday. This was not a crowd of bustling shoppers loaded with bright bags of presents. Their arms were empty, their hands shoved deep in their pockets against the cold, which nevertheless had not driven them to the solitude of their presumably warm houses. I watched them enter and exit store after store without buying anything. Many merchants remained open late, and even the places that were closed had left their neon signs illuminated. The faces that passed the window of the diner were possibly just stiffened by the cold, I thought; frozen into deep frowns and nothing

else. In the same window I saw the reflection of my own face. It was not the face of an adept clown; it was slack and flabby and at that moment seemed the face of someone less than alive. Outside was the town of Mirocaw, its streets dipping and rising with a lunatic severity, its citizens packing the sidewalks, its heart bathed in green: as promising a field of professional and personal challenge as I had ever encountered—and I was bored to the point of dread. I hurried back to my hotel room.

"Mirocaw has another coldness within its cold," I wrote in my journal that night. "Another set of buildings and streets that exists behind the visible town's façade like a world of disgraceful back alleys." I went on like this for about a page, across which I finally engraved a big " X." Then I went to bed.

In the morning I left my car at the hotel and walked toward the main business district a few blocks away. Mingling with the good people of Mirocaw seemed like the proper thing to do at that point in my scientific sojourn. But as I began laboriously walking up Townshend (the sidewalks were cramped with wandering pedestrians), a glimpse of someone suddenly replaced my haphazard plan with a more specific and immediate one. Through the crowd and about fifteen paces ahead was my goal.

"Dr. Thoss," I called.

His head almost seemed to turn and look back in response to my shout, but I could not be certain. I pushed past several warmly wrapped bodies and green-scarved necks, only to find that the object of my pursuit appeared to be maintaining the same distance from me, though I did not know if this was being done deliberately or not. At the next

corner, the dark-coated Thoss abruptly turned right onto a steep street which led downward directly toward the dilapidated south end of Mirocaw. When I reached the corner I looked down the sidewalk and could see him very clearly from above. I also saw how he managed to stay so far ahead of me in a mob that had impeded my own progress. For some reason the people on the sidewalk made room so that he could move past them easily, without the usual jostling of bodies. It was not a dramatic physical avoidance, though it seemed nonetheless intentional. Fighting the tight fabric of the throng, I continued to follow Thoss, losing and regaining sight of him.

By the time I reached the bottom of the sloping street the crowd had thinned out considerably, and after walking a block or so farther I found myself practically a lone pedestrian pacing behind a distant figure that I hoped was still Thoss. He was now walking quite swiftly and in a way that seemed to acknowledge my pursuit of him, though really it felt as if he were leading me as much as I was chasing him. I called his name a few more times at a volume he could not have failed to hear, assuming that deafness was not one of the changes to have come over him; he was, after all, not a young man, even a middle-aged one any longer.

Thoss suddenly crossed in the middle of the street. He walked a few more steps and entered a signless brick building between a liquor store and a repair shop of some kind. In the "Harlequin" article Thoss had mentioned that the people living in this section of Mirocaw maintained their own businesses, and that these were patronized almost exclusively by residents of the area. I could well believe this statement when I looked at these little sheds of commerce, for they had

the same badly weathered appearance as their clientele. The formidable shoddiness of these buildings notwithstanding, I followed Thoss into the plain brick shell of what had been, or possibly still was, a diner.

Inside it was unusually dark. Even before my eyes made the adjustment I sensed that this was not a thriving restaurant cozily cluttered with chairs and tables—as was the establishment where I had eaten the night before—but a place with only a few disarranged furnishings, and very cold. It seemed colder, in fact, than the winter streets outside.

"Dr. Thoss?" I called toward a table near the center of the long room. Perhaps four or five were sitting around the table, with some others blending into the dimness behind them. Scattered across the tabletop were some books and loose papers. Seated there was an old man indicating something in the pages before him, but it was not Thoss. Beside him were two youths whose wholesome features distinguished them from the grim weariness of the others. I approached the table and they all looked up at me. None of them showed a glimmer of emotion except the two boys, who exchanged worried and guilt-ridden glances with each other, as if they had just been discovered in some shameful act. They both suddenly burst from the table and ran into the dark background, where a light appeared briefly as they exited by a back door.

"I'm sorry," I said diffidently. "I thought I saw someone I knew come in here."

They said nothing. Out of a back room others began to emerge, no doubt interested in the source of the commotion. In a few moments the room was crowded with these tramp-like figures, all of them gazing emptily in the dimness. I was

not at this point frightened of them; at least I was not afraid they would do me any physical harm. Actually, I felt as if it was quite within my power to pummel them easily into submission, their mousy faces almost inviting a succession of firm blows. But there were so many of them.

They slid slowly toward me in a wormy mass. Their eyes seemed empty and unfocused, and I wondered a moment if they were even aware of my presence. Nevertheless, I was the center upon which their lethargic shuffling converged, their shoes scuffing softly along the bare floor. I began to deliver a number of hasty inanities as they continued to press toward me, their weak and unexpectedly odorless bodies nudging against mine. (I understood now why the people along the sidewalks seemed instinctively to avoid Thoss.) Unseen legs became entangled with my own; I staggered and then regained my balance. This sudden movement aroused me from a kind of mesmeric daze into which I must have fallen without being aware of it. I had intended to leave that dreary place long before events had reached such a juncture, but for some reason I could not focus my intentions strongly enough to cause myself to act. My mind had been drifting farther away as these abject things approached. In a sudden surge of panic I pushed through their soft ranks and was outside.

The open air revived me to my former alertness, and I immediately started pacing swiftly up the hill. I was no longer sure that I had not simply imagined what had seemed, and at the same time did not seem, like a perilous moment. Had their movements been directed toward a harmful assault, or were they trying merely to intimidate

me? As I reached the green-glazed main street of Mirocaw I really could not determine what had just happened.

The sidewalks were still jammed with a multitude of pedestrians, who now seemed more lively than they had been only a short time before. There was a kind of vitality that could only be attributed to the imminent festivities. A group of young men had begun celebrating prematurely and strode noisily across the street at midpoint, obviously intoxicated. From the laughter and joking among the still sober citizens I gathered that, mardi-gras style, public drunkenness was within the traditions of this winter festival. I looked for anything to indicate the beginnings of the Street Masquerade, but saw nothing: no brightly garbed harlequins or snow-white pierrots. Were the ceremonies even now in preparation for the coronation of the Winter Queen? "The Winter Queen," I wrote in my journal. "Figure of fertility invested with symbolic powers of revival and prosperity. Elected in the manner of a high school prom queen. Check for possible consort figure in the form of a representative from the underworld."

In the pre-darkness hours of December 19 I sat in my hotel room and wrote and thought and organized. I did not feel too badly, all things considered. The holiday excitement which was steadily rising in the streets below my window was definitely infecting me. I forced myself to take a short nap in anticipation of a long night. When I awoke, Mirocaw's annual feast was in full motion.

5.

Practically bounding from my bed to the sounds of bustling and carousing outside, I went to the window and looked

out over the town. It seemed all the lights of Mirocaw were shining, save in that section down the hill which became part of the black void of winter. And now the town's greenish tinge was even more pronounced, spreading everywhere like a great green rainbow that had melted from the sky and endured, phosphorescent, into the night. In the streets was the brightness of an artificial spring. The byways of Mirocaw vibrated with activity: on a nearby corner a brass band blared; marauding cars blew their horns and were sometimes mounted by laughing pedestrians; a man emerged from the Red Rooster Bar, threw up his arms, and crowed. I looked closely at the individual celebrants, searching for the vestments of clowns. Soon, delightedly, I saw them. The costume was red and white, with matching cap, and the face painted a noble alabaster. It almost seemed to be a clownish incarnation of that white-bearded and black-booted Christmas fool.

This particular fool, however, was not receiving the affection and respect usually accorded to a Santa Claus. My poor fellow-clown was in the middle of a circle of revelers who were pushing him back and forth from one to the other. The object of this abuse seemed to accept it somewhat willingly, but this little game nevertheless appeared to have humiliation as its purpose. “Only clowns here are the ones that're picked out,” echoed Beadle's voice in my memory. “Picked on” seemed closer to the truth.

Packing myself in some heavy clothes, I went out into the green gleaming streets. Not far from the hotel I was stumbled into by a character with a wide blue and red grin and bright baggy clothes. Actually he had been shoved in my direction by some young men outside a drugstore. He lost

his footing on the slick sidewalk and tumbled down into a bank of snow along the street.

“See the freak,” said an obese and drunken fellow. “See the freak fall.”

My first response was anger, and then fear as I saw two others flanking the fat drunk. They walked toward me and I tensed myself for a confrontation.

“This is a disgrace,” one said, the neck of a wine bottle held loosely in his left hand.

But it was not to me they were speaking; it was to the clown. His three persecutors helped him up with a sudden jerk and then splashed wine in his face. They ignored me altogether.

“Let him loose,” the fat one said. “Crawl away, freak. Oh, he flies!”

The clown trotted off, becoming lost in the throng.

“Wait a minute,” I said to the rowdy trio, who had started lumbering away. I quickly decided that it would probably be futile to ask them to explain what I had just witnessed, especially amid the noise and confusion of the festivities. In my best jovial fashion I proposed we all go someplace where I could buy them each a drink. They had no objection and in a short while we were all squeezed around a table in the Red Rooster.

Soon after we were served, I told them that I was from out of town and asked if they could explain some things... I did not understand about their festival.

“I don't think there's anything to understand,” the fat one said. “It's just what you see.”

I asked him about the people dressed as clowns.

"Them? They're the freaks. It's their turn this year. Everyone takes their turn. Next year it might be mine. Or *yours*," he said, pointing at one of his friends across the table. "And when we find out which one you are—"

"You're not smart enough," said the defiant potential freak.

This was an important point: the fact that individuals who played the clowns remained, or at least attempted to remain, anonymous. This arrangement would help remove inhibitions a resident of Mirocaw might have about abusing his own neighbor or even a family relation. From what I later observed, the extent of this abuse did not go beyond a kind of playful roughhousing. And even so, it was only the occasional group of rowdies who actually took advantage of this aspect of the festival, the majority of the citizens very much content to stay on the sidelines.

As far as being able to illuminate the meaning of this custom, my three young friends were quite useless. To them it was just amusement, as I imagine it was to the majority of Mirocavians. This was understandable. I suppose the average person would not be able to explain exactly how the profoundly familiar Christmas holiday came to be celebrated in its present form.

I left the bar alone and not unaffected by the drinks I had consumed there. Outside, the general merrymaking continued. Loud music emanated from several quarters. Mirocaw had fully transformed itself from a sedate small town to an enclave of Saturnalia within the dark immensity of a winter night. But Saturn is also the planetary symbol of melancholy and sterility, a clash of opposites contained within that single word. And as I wandered half-drunkenly down the

street, I discovered that there was a conflict within the winter festival itself. This discovery indeed appeared to be that secret key which Thoss withheld in his study of the town. Oddly enough, it was through my unfamiliarity with the outward nature of the festival that I came to know its true nature.

I was mingling with the crowd on the street, warmly enjoying the confusion around me, when I saw a strangely designed creature lingering on the corner up ahead. It was one of the Mirocaw clowns. Its clothes were shabby and nondescript, almost in the style of a tramp-type clown, but not humorously exaggerated enough. The face, though, made up for the lackluster costume. I had never seen such a strange conception for a clown's countenance. The figure stood beneath a dim streetlight, and when it turned its head my way I felt a sense of recognition. The thin, smooth, and pale head; the wide eyes; the oval-shaped features resembling nothing so much as the skull-faced, screaming creature in that famous painting (memory fails me). This clownish imitation rivaled the original in summoning an effect of stricken horror and despair. It had an inhuman likeness more proper to something under the earth than upon it.

From the first moment I saw this creature, I thought of those inhabitants of the ghetto down the hill. There was the same nauseating passivity and languor in its bearing. Perhaps if I had not been drinking earlier I would not have been bold enough to take the action I did. I decided to join in one of the upstanding traditions of the winter festival, for it annoyed me to see this morbid impostor of a clown standing up. When I reached the corner I laughingly pushed myself into the creature—“Whoops!”—who stumbled backward and

ended up on the sidewalk. I laughed again and looked around for approval from my fellow merrymakers in the vicinity. No one, however, seemed to appreciate or even acknowledge what I had done. They did not laugh with me or point with amusement, but only passed by, perhaps walking a little faster until they were some distance from this street-corner incident. I realized instantly I had violated some tacit rule of behavior, though I had thought my action well within the common practice. The idea occurred to me that I might even be apprehended and prosecuted for what in any other circumstances was certainly a criminal act. I turned around to help the clown back to his feet, hoping to somehow redeem my offense, but the creature was gone. Solemnly I walked away from the scene of my inadvertent crime and sought other streets away from its witnesses.

Along the various back avenues of Mirocaw I wandered, pausing exhaustedly at one point to sit at the counter of a small sandwich shop that was packed with customers. I ordered a cup of coffee to revive my inebriated system. Warming my hands around the cup and sipping slowly from it, I watched the people outside as they passed the front window. It was well after midnight but the thick flow of passersby gave no indication that anyone was going home early. A carnival of profiles filed past the window and I was content simply to sit back and observe, until finally one of these faces made me start. It was that frightful little clown I had roughed up earlier. But although its face was familiar in its ghastly aspect, there was something different about it. And I wondered that there should be two hideous freaks.

Quickly paying the man at the counter, I dashed out to get a second glimpse of the clown, who was now nowhere to be

seen. I wondered how it could have made its way so easily out of sight, unless the dense crowd along the sidewalk had instinctively allowed this creature to pass unhindered through its massive ranks, as it did for Thoss. In the process of searching for this particular freak, I discovered that interspersed among the celebrating populace of Mirocaw, which included the sanctioned festival clowns, there was not one or two, but a considerable number of these pale, wraithlike creatures. And they all drifted along the streets unmolested by even the rowdiest of revelers. I now understood one of the taboos of the festival. These other clowns were not to be disturbed and should even be avoided, much as were the residents of the slum at the edge of town. Nevertheless, I felt instinctively that the two groups of clowns were somehow identified with each other, even if the ghetto clowns were not welcome at Mirocaw's winter festival. Indeed, they might legitimately be regarded as part of the community and celebrating the season in their own way. To all appearances, this group of melancholy mummers constituted nothing less than an entirely independent festival—a festival within a festival.

Returning to my room, I entered my suppositions into the journal I was keeping for this venture. The following are excerpts:

There is a superstitiousness displayed by the residents of Mirocaw with regard to these people from the slum section, particularly as they lately appear in those dreadful faces signifying their own festival. What is the relationship between these simultaneous celebrations? Did one precede the other? If so, which? My opinion at this point—and I claim no conclusiveness for it—is that Mirocaw's winter festival is the

later manifestation, that it appeared after the festival of those depressingly pallid clowns, in order to cover it up or mitigate its effect. The holiday suicides come to mind, and the “subclimate” Thoss wrote about, as well as the disappearance of Elizabeth Beadle twenty years ago, and my encounter this very day with the pariah clan existing outside yet within the community. Of my own experience with this emotionally deleterious subseason I would rather not speak at this time. Still not able to say whether or not my usual winter melancholy is the cause. On the general subject of mental health, I must consider Thoss's book about his stay in a psychiatric hospital (in western Massachusetts, almost sure of that. Check on this book and Mirocaw's New England roots). The winter solstice is tomorrow, albeit sometime past midnight. It is, of course, the day of the year on which night hours surpass daylight hours by the greatest margin. Note what this has to do with the suicides and a rise in psychic disorder. Recalling Thoss's list of documented suicides in his article, there seemed to be a recurrence of specific family names, as there very likely might be for any kind of data collected in a small town. Among these names was a Beadle or two. Perhaps, then, there is a hereditary basis for the suicides which has nothing to do with Thoss's mystical subclimate, which is a colorful idea to be sure and one that seems fitting for this town of various outward and inward aspects, but is not a conception that can be substantiated.

One thing that seems certain, however, is the division of Mirocaw into two very distinct types of citizenry, resulting in two festivals and the appearance of similar clowns—a term now used in an extremely loose sense. But there is a connection, and I believe I have some idea of what it is. I said

before that the normal residents of the town regard those from the ghetto, and especially their clown figures, with superstition. Yet it's more than that: there is fear, perhaps hatred—the particular kind of hatred resulting from some powerful and irrational memory. What threatens Mirocaw I think I can very well understand. I recall the incident earlier today in that vacant diner. “Vacant” is the appropriate word here. The congregation of that half-lit room formed less a presence than an absence, even considering the oppressive number of them. Those eyes that did not or could not focus on anything, the pining lassitude of their faces, the lazy march of their feet. I was spiritually drained when I ran out of there. I then understood why these people and their activities are avoided.

I cannot question the wisdom of those ancestral Mirocavians who began the tradition of the winter festival and gave the town a pretext for celebration and social intercourse at a time when the consequences of brooding isolation are most severe, those longest and darkest days of the solstice. A mood of Christmas joviality obviously would not be sufficient to counter the menace of this season. But even so, there are still the suicides of individuals who are somehow cut off, I imagine, from the vitalizing activities of the festival.

It is the nature of this insidious subseason that seems to determine the outward forms of Mirocaw's winter festival: the optimistic greenery in a period of gray dormancy; the fertile promise of the Winter Queen; and, most interesting to my mind, the clowns—the bright clowns of Mirocaw who are treated so badly. They appear to serve as surrogate figures for those dark-eyed mummers of the slums. Since the

latter are feared for some power or influence they possess, they may still be symbolically confronted and conquered through their counterparts, who are elected for precisely this function. If I am right about this, I wonder to what extent there is a conscious awareness among the town's populace of this indirect show of aggression. Those three young men I spoke with tonight did not seem to possess much insight beyond seeing that there was a certain amount of robust fun in the festival's tradition. For that matter, how much awareness is there on the o*ther side* of these two antagonistic festivals? Too horrible to think of such a thing, but I must wonder if, for all their apparent aimlessness, those inhabitants of the ghetto are not the only ones who know what they are about. No denying that behind those inhumanly limp expressions there seems to be a kind of obnoxious intelligence.

As I wobbled from street to street tonight, watching those oval-mouthed clowns, I could not help feeling that all the merrymaking in Mirocaw was somehow allowed only by their sufferance. This I hope is no more than a fanciful Thossian intuition, the sort of idea that is curious and thought-provoking without ever seeming to gain the benefit of confirmation. I know my mind is not entirely lucid, but I feel that it may be possible to penetrate Mirocaw's many complexities and illuminate the hidden side of the festival season. In particular I must look for the significance of the other festival. Is it also some kind of fertility celebration? From what I have seen, the tenor of this “celebrating” subgroup is one of anti-fertility, if anything. How have they managed to keep from dying out completely over the years? How do they maintain their numbers?

But I was too tired to formulate any more of my sodden speculations. Falling onto my bed, I soon became lost in dreams of streets and faces.

6.

I was, of course, slightly hung over when I woke up late the next morning. The festival was still going strong, and blaring music outside roused me from a nightmare. It was a parade. A number of floats proceeded down Townshend, a familiar color predominating. There were theme floats of pilgrims and Indians, cowboys and Indians, and clowns of an orthodox type. In the middle of it all was the Winter Queen herself, freezing atop an icy throne. She waved in all directions. I even imagined she waved up at my dark window. In the first few groggy moments of wakefulness I had no sympathy with my excitation of the previous night. But I discovered that my former enthusiasm had merely lain dormant, and soon returned with an even greater intensity. Never before had my mind and senses been so active during this usually inert time of year. At home I would have been playing lugubrious old records and looking out the window quite a bit. I was terribly grateful in a completely abstract way for my commitment to a meaningful mania. And I was eager to get to work after I had had some breakfast at the coffee shop.

When I got back to my room I discovered the door was unlocked. And there was something written on the dresser mirror. The writing was red and greasy, as if done with a clown's make-up pencil—my own, I realized. I read the legend, or rather I should say *riddle*, several times: “What buries itself before it is dead?” I looked at it for quite a while,

very shaken at how vulnerable my holiday fortifications were. Was this supposed to be a warning of some kind? A threat to the effect that if I persisted in a certain course I would end up prematurely interred? I would have to be careful, I told myself. My resolution was to let nothing deter me from the inspired strategy I had conceived for myself. I wiped the mirror clean, for it was now needed for other purposes.

I spent the rest of the day devising a very special costume and the appropriate face to go with it. I easily shabbied up my overcoat with a torn pocket or two and a complete set of stains. Combined with blue jeans and a pair of rather scuffed-up shoes, I had a passable costume for a derelict. The face, however, was more difficult, for I had to experiment from memory. Conjuring a mental image of the shrieking pierrot in that painting (*The Scream*, I now recall), helped me quite a bit. At nightfall I exited the hotel by the back stairway.

It was strange to walk down the crowded street in this gruesome disguise. Though I thought I would feel conspicuous, the actual experience was very close, I imagined, to one of complete invisibility. No one looked at me as I strolled by, or as they strolled by, or as we strolled by each other. I was a phantom—perhaps the ghost of festivals past, or those yet to come.

I had no clear idea where my disguise would take me that night, only vague expectations of gaining the confidence of my fellow specters and possibly in some way coming to know their secrets. For a while I would simply wander around in that lackadaisical manner I had learned from them, following their lead in any way they might indicate.

And for the most part this meant doing almost nothing and doing it silently. If I passed one of my kind on the sidewalk there was no speaking, no exchange of knowing looks, no recognition at all that I was aware of. We were there on the streets of Mirocaw to create a presence and nothing more. At least this is how I came to feel about it. As I drifted along with my bodiless invisibility, I felt myself more and more becoming an empty, floating shape, seeing without being seen and walking without the interference of those grosser creatures who shared my world. It was not an experience completely without interest and even enjoyment. The clown's shibboleth of “Here we are again” took on a new meaning for me as I felt myself a novitiate of a more rarefied order of harlequinry. And very soon the opportunity to make further progress along this path presented itself.

Going the opposite direction, down the street, a pickup truck slowly passed, gently parting a sea of zigging and zagging celebrants. The cargo in the back of this truck was curious, for it was made up entirely of my fellow sectarians. At the end of the block the truck stopped and another of them boarded it over the back gate. One block down I saw still another get on. Then the truck made a U-turn at an intersection and headed in my direction.

I stood at the curb as I had seen the others do. I was not sure the truck would pick me up, thinking that somehow they knew I was an impostor. The truck did, however, slow down, almost coming to a stop when it reached me. The others were crowded on the floor of the truck bed. Most of them were just staring at nothing with the usual indifference I had come to expect from their kind. But a few actually glanced at me with some anticipation. For a second I hesitated, not sure

I wanted to pursue this ruse any further. At the last moment, though, some impulse sent me climbing up the back of the truck and squeezing myself in among the others.

There were only a few more to pick up before the truck headed for the outskirts of Mirocaw and beyond. At first I tried to maintain a clear orientation with respect to the town. But as we took turn after turn through the darkness of narrow country roads, I found myself unable to preserve any sense of direction. The majority of the others in the back of the truck exhibited no apparent awareness of their fellow passengers. Guardedly, I looked from face to ghostly face. A few of them spoke in short whispered phrases to others close by. I could not make out what they were saying but the tone of their voices was one of innocent normalcy, as if they were not of the
hardened slum-herd of Mirocaw. Perhaps, I thought, these were thrill-seekers who had disguised themselves as I had done, or, more likely, initiates of some kind. Possibly they had received prior instructions at such meetings as I had stumbled onto the day before. It was also likely that among this crew were those very boys I had frightened into a precipitate exit from that old diner.

The truck was now speeding along a fairly open stretch of country, heading toward those higher hills that surrounded the now distant town of Mirocaw. The icy wind whipped around us, and I could not keep myself from trembling with cold. This definitely betrayed me as one of the newcomers among the group, for the two bodies that pressed against mine were rigidly still and even seemed to be radiating a frigidity of their own. I glanced ahead at the darkness into which we were rapidly progressing.

We had left all open country behind us now, and the road was enclosed by thick woods. The mass of bodies in the truck leaned into one another as we began traveling up a steep incline. Above us, at the top of the hill, were lights shining somewhere within the woods. When the road leveled off, the truck made an abrupt turn, steering into what looked like a great ditch. There was an unpaved path, however, upon which the truck proceeded toward the glowing in the near distance.

This glowing became brighter and sharper as we approached it, flickering upon the trees and revealing stark detail where there had formerly been only smooth darkness. As the truck pulled into a clearing and came to a stop, I saw a loose assembly of figures, many of which held lanterns that beamed with a dazzling and frosty light. I stood up in the back of the truck to unboard as the others were doing. Glancing around from that height I saw approximately thirty more of those cadaverous clowns milling about. One of my fellow passengers spied me lingering in the truck and in a strangely high-pitched whisper told me to hurry, explaining something about the "apex of darkness." I thought again about this solstice night; it was technically the longest period of darkness of the year, even if not by a very significant margin from many other winter nights. Its true significance, though, was related to considerations having little to do with either statistics or the calendar.

I went over to the place where the others were forming into a tighter crowd, which betrayed a sense of expectancy in the subtle gestures and expressions of its individual members. Glances were now exchanged, the hand of one lightly touched the shoulder of another, and a pair of circled eyes

gazed over to where two figures were setting their lanterns on the ground about six feet apart. The illumination of these lanterns revealed an opening in the earth. Eventually the awareness of everyone was focused on this roundish pit, and as if by prearranged signal we all began huddling around it. The only sounds were those of the wind and our own movements as we crushed frozen leaves and sticks underfoot.

Finally, when we had all surrounded this gaping hole, the first one jumped in, leaving our sight for a moment but then reappearing to take hold of a lantern which another handed him from above. The miniature abyss filled with light, and I could see it was no more than six feet deep. One of its walls opened into the mouth of a tunnel. The figure holding the lantern stooped a little and disappeared into the passage.

Each of us, in turn, dropped into the darkness of this pit, and every fifth one took a lantern. I kept to the back of the group, for whatever subterranean activities were going to take place, I was sure I wanted to be on their periphery. When only about ten of us remained on the ground above, I maneuvered to let four of them precede me so that I might receive a lantern. This was exactly how it worked out, for after I had leaped to the bottom of the hole a light was ritually handed down to me. Turning about-face, I quickly entered the passageway. At that point I shook so with cold that I was neither curious nor afraid, grateful for the shelter.

I entered a long, gently sloping tunnel, just high enough for me to stand upright. It was considerably warmer down there than outside in the cold darkness of the woods. After a few moments I had sufficiently thawed out so that my concerns shifted from those of physical comfort to a sudden and justified preoccupation with my survival. As I walked I held

my lantern close to the sides of the tunnel. They were relatively smooth as if the passage had not been made by manual digging but had been burrowed by something which left behind a clue to its dimensions in the tunnel's size and shape. This delirious idea came to me when I recalled the message that had been left on my hotel room mirror: “What buries itself before it is dead?”

I had to hurry along to keep up with those uncanny spelunkers who preceded me. The lanterns ahead bobbed with every step of their bearers, the lumbering procession seeming less and less real the farther we marched into that snug little tunnel. At some point I noticed the line ahead of me growing shorter. The processioners were emptying out into a cavernous chamber where I, too, soon arrived. This area was about thirty feet in height, its other dimensions approximating those of a large ballroom. Gazing into the distance above made me uncomfortably aware of how far we had descended into the earth. Unlike the smooth sides of the tunnel, the walls of this cavern looked jagged and irregular, as though they had been gnawed at. The earth had been removed, I assumed, either through the tunnel from which we had emerged, or else by way of one of the many other black openings that I saw around the edges of the chamber, for possibly they too led back to the surface.

But the structure of this chamber occupied my mind a great deal less than did its occupants. There to meet us on the floor of the great cavern was what must have been the entire slum population of Mirocaw, and more, all with the same eerily wide-eyed and oval-mouthed faces. They formed a circle around an altar-like object which had some kind of dark, leathery covering draped over it. Upon the altar, an-

other covering of the same material concealed a lumpy form beneath. And behind this form, looking down upon the altar, was the only figure whose face was not greased with makeup.

He wore a long snowy robe that was the same color as the wispy hair berimming his head. His arms were calmly at his sides. He made no movement. The man I once believed would penetrate great secrets stood before us with the same professorial bearing that had impressed me so many years ago, yet now I felt nothing but dread at the thought of what revelations lay pocketed within the abysmal folds of his magisterial attire. Had I really come here to challenge such a formidable figure? The name by which I knew him seemed itself insufficient to designate one of his stature. Rather I should name him by his other incarnations: god of all wisdom, scribe of all sacred books, father of all magicians, thrice great and more—rather I should call him *Thoth*.

He raised his cupped hands to his congregation and the ceremony was underway.

It was all very simple. The entire assembly, which had remained speechless until this moment, broke into the most horrendous high-pitched singing that can be imagined. It was a choir of sorrow, lament, and mortification. The cavern rang with the dissonant, whining chorus. My voice, too, was added to the congregation's, trying to blend with their maimed music. But my singing could not imitate theirs, having a huskiness at odds with the keening ululation of that company. To keep from exposing myself as an intruder I continued to mouth their words without sound. These words were a revelation of the moody malignancy which until then I had no more than sensed whenever in the presence of these

figures. They were singing to the “unborn in paradise,” to the “pure unlived lives.” They sang a dirge for existence, for all its vital forms and seasons. Their ideal was a melancholy half-existence consecrated to all the many shapes of death and dissolution. A sea of thin, bloodless faces trembled and screamed their antipathy to being itself. And the robed, guiding figure at the heart of all this—elevated over the course of twenty years to the status of high priest—was the man from whom I had taken so many of my own life's principles. It would be useless to describe what I felt at that moment and a waste of the time I need to describe the events which followed.

The singing abruptly stopped and the towering white-haired figure began to speak. He was welcoming those of the new generation—twenty winters had passed since the “Pure Ones” had expanded their ranks. The word “pure” in this setting was a violence to what sense and composure I still retained, for nothing could have been more foul than what was to come. Thoss—and I employ this defunct identity only as a convenience—closed his sermon and drew closer to the dark-skinned altar. Then, with all the flourish of his former life, he drew back the topmost covering. Beneath it was a limp-limbed effigy, a collapsed puppet sprawled upon the slab. I was standing toward the rear of the congregation and attempted to keep as close to the exit passage as I could. Thus, I did not see everything as clearly as I might have.

Thoss looked down upon the crooked, doll-like form and then out at the gathering. I even imagined that he made knowing eye-contact with myself. He spread his arms and a stream of continuous and unintelligible words flowed from his moaning mouth. The congregation began to stir, not

greatly but perceptibly. Until that
moment there was a limit to what I believed was the evil of these people. They were, after all, only that. They were merely morbid souls with beliefs that were eccentric to the healthy social order around them. If there was anything I had learned in all my years as an anthropologist it was that the world is infinitely rich in phenomena that society as we know it (whoever “we” might be) would regard as strange, even to the point where the concept of strangeness itself had little meaning for me. But with the scene I then witnessed, my conscience vaulted into a realm from which it will never return.

For now was the transformation scene, the culmination of every harlequinade.

It began slowly. There was increasing movement among those on the far side of the chamber from where I stood. Someone had fallen to the floor and the others in the area backed away. The voice at the altar continued its chanting. I tried to gain a better view but there were too many of them around me. Through the mass of
obstructing bodies I caught only glimpses of what was taking place.

The one who had swooned to the floor of the chamber seemed to be losing all former shape and proportion. I thought it was a clown's trick. They were clowns, were they not? I myself could make four white balls transform into four black balls as I juggled them. And this was not my most astonishing feat of clownish magic. And is there not always a sleight-of-hand inherent in all ceremonies, often dependent on the transported delusions of the celebrants? This was a good show, I thought, and giggled to myself. The transform-

ation scene of Harlequin throwing off his fool's façade. O God, Harlequin, do not move like that! Harlequin, where are your arms? And your legs have melted together and begun squirming upon the floor. What horrible, mouthing umbilicus is that where your face should be? *What is it that buries itself before it is dead*? The almighty serpent of wisdom—the Conqueror Worm.

It now started happening all around the chamber. Individual members of the congregation would gaze emptily—caught for a moment in a frozen trance—and then collapse to the floor to begin the sickening metamorphosis. This happened with ever-increasing frequency the louder and more frantically Thoss chanted his insane prayer or curse. Then there began a writhing movement toward the altar, and Thoss welcomed the things as they curled their way to the altar-top. I knew now what lax figure lay upon it.

This was Kora and Persephone, the daughter of Ceres and the Winter Queen: the child abducted into the underworld of death. Except this child had no supernatural mother to save her, no living mother at all. For the sacrifice I witnessed was an echo of one that had occurred twenty years before, the carnival feast of the preceding generation—O *carne vale!* Now both mother and daughter had become victims of this subterranean sabbat. I finally realized this truth when the figure stirred upon the altar, lifted its head of icy beauty, and screamed at the sight of mute mouths closing around her.

I ran from the chamber into the tunnel. (There was nothing else that could be done, I have obsessively told myself.) Some of the others who had not yet changed began to pursue me. They would have caught up to me, I have no doubt, for I fell only a few yards into the passage. And for a moment I

imagined that I too was about to undergo a transformation. Anything seemed possible now. When I heard the approaching footsteps of my pursuers I was sure there was nothing left for me but the worst finale a human being can suffer—the death known to those whom the gods have first made mad. Perhaps I would even be forced to take a place on the altar among the gory remnants of the Winter Queen. But the footsteps behind me ceased and retreated. They had received an order in the voice of their high priest. I too heard the order, though I wish I had not, for until then I had imagined that Thoss did not remember who I was. It was that voice which taught me otherwise.

For the moment I was free to leave. I struggled to my feet and, having broken my lantern in the fall, retraced my way back through cloacal blackness.

Everything seemed to happen very quickly once I emerged from the tunnel and climbed up from the pit. I wiped the reeking greasepaint from my face as I ran through the woods and back to the road. A passing car stopped, though I gave it no other choice except to run me down.

"Thank you for stopping."

"What the hell are you doing out here?" the driver asked.

I caught my breath. "It was a joke. The festival. Friends thought it would be funny. Please drive on."

My ride let me off about a mile out of town, and from there I could find my way. It was the same route I traveled when I first visited Mirocaw the summer before. I stood for a while at the summit of that high hill just outside the city limits, looking down upon the busy little hamlet. The intensity of the festival had not abated. I walked toward the

welcoming glow of green and slipped through the festivities unnoticed.

When I reached the hotel I was glad to see that no one was about. Given that I was so obviously a wreck, I feared meeting anyone who might ask what had happened to me. The hotel desk was unattended, so I was spared having to speak with Beadle. Indeed, there was an atmosphere of abandonment throughout the place that I found ominous yet did not pause to contemplate.

I trod up the stairs to my room. Locking the door behind me, I then collapsed upon the bed and was soon enshrouded by a merciful blackness.

7.

When I awoke the next morning I saw from my window that the town and surrounding countryside had been visited during the night by a heavy snowfall, one which was entirely unpredicted. A few leftover flakes were still lighting on the now deserted streets of Mirocaw, and buried beneath the drifts below were the last vestiges of revelry and celebration. The festival was over. Everyone had retired to their homes.

And this was exactly my own intention. Any action on my part concerning what I had seen the night before would have to wait until I was away from the town. I am still not sure it will do the slightest good to speak up like this. Any accusations I have made with respect to the slum populace of Mirocaw are eminently subject to dismissal, perhaps as a hoax or a festival hallucination. And thereafter this document will take its place alongside the works of Raymond Thoss.

With packed suitcases in both hands I walked up to the front desk to check out. The man behind the desk was not Samuel Beadle, and he had to fumble around to find my bill.

“Here we are. Everything all right?”

“Fine,” I answered in a dead voice. “Is Mr. Beadle around?”

“No, I'm afraid he's not back yet. Been out all night looking for his daughter. She's a very popular girl, being the Winter Queen and all that nonsense. Probably find she was at a party somewhere.”

A little noise came out of my throat.

I threw my suitcases in the back seat of my car and got behind the wheel. On that morning nothing I could recall seemed real to me. The snow was falling and I watched it through my windshield, slow and silent and entrancing. I started up my car, routinely glancing in my rear view mirror. What I saw there is now vividly framed in my mind, as it was framed in the back window of my car when I turned to verify its reality.

In the middle of the street behind me, standing ankle-deep in snow, were Thoss and another figure. When I looked closely at the other I recognized him as one of the boys whom I surprised in that diner. But he had now taken on a listless resemblance to his new family. Both he and Thoss stared at me, making no attempt to forestall my departure. Thoss knew that this was unnecessary.

I had to carry the image of those two dark figures in my mind as I drove back home. And only now has the full gravity of my experience descended upon me. So far I have claimed illness in order to avoid my teaching schedule. To face the normal flow of life as I had formerly known it would

be impossible. I am now very much under the influence of a season and a climate far colder and more barren than all the winters in human memory. And mentally retracing past events does not seem to have helped. If anything, I now feel myself sinking deeper into a velvety white abyss.

At certain times I could almost dissolve entirely into this inner realm of purity and emptiness, the paradise of the unborn. I remember how I was momentarily overtaken by a feeling I had never known when in disguise I drifted through the streets of Mirocaw, untouched by the drunken, noisy forms around me: untouchable. It was the feeling that I had been liberated from the *weight of life*. But I recoil at this seductive nostalgia, for it mocks my existence as mere foolery, a bright clown's mask behind which I have sought to hide my darkness. I realize what is happening and what I do not want to be true, though Thoss proclaimed it was. I recall his command to those others as I lay helplessly prone in the tunnel. They could have apprehended me, but Thoss, my old master, called them back. His voice echoed throughout that cavern, and it now reverberates within the psychic chambers of my memory.

"He is one of us," it said. "He has *always* been one of us."

It is this voice which now fills my dreams and my days and my long winter nights. I have seen you, Dr. Thoss, through the snow outside my window. Soon I will celebrate, alone, that last feast which will kill your words, only to prove how well I have learned their truth.

To the memory of H. P. Lovecraft

The Last Feast of Harlequin (1991 Grimscribe Version)

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1.

My interest in the town of Mirocaw was first aroused when I heard that an annual festival was held there which promised to include, to some extent, the participation of clowns among its other elements of pageantry. A former colleague of mine, who is now attached to the anthropology department of a distant university, had read one of my recent articles ("The Clown Figure in American Media," *Journal of Popular Culture*), and wrote to me that he vaguely remembered reading or being told of a town somewhere in the state that held a kind of "Fool's Feast" every year, thinking that this might be pertinent to my peculiar line of study. It was, of course, more pertinent than he had reason to think, both to my academic aims in this area and to my personal pursuits.

Aside from my teaching, I had for some years been engaged in various anthropological projects with the primary ambition of articulating the significance of the clown figure in diverse cultural contexts. Every year for the past twenty years I have attended the pre-Lenten festivals that are held in various places throughout the southern United States. Every year I learned something more concerning the esoterics of celebration. In these studies I was an eager participant-

along with playing my part as an anthropologist, I also took a place behind the clownish mask myself. And I cherished this role as I did nothing else in my life. To me the title of Clown has always carried connotations of a noble sort. I was an adroit jester, strangely enough, and had always taken pride in the skills I worked so diligently to develop.

I wrote to the State Department of Recreation, indicating what information I desired and exposing an enthusiastic urgency which came naturally to me on this topic. Many weeks later I received a tan envelope imprinted with a government logo. Inside was a pamphlet that catalogued all of the various seasonal festivities of which the state was officially aware, and I noted in passing that there were as many in late autumn and winter as in the warmer seasons. A letter inserted within the pamphlet explained to me that, according to their voluminous records, no festivals held in the town of Mirocaw had been officially registered. Their files, nonetheless, could be placed at my disposal if I should wish to research this or similar matters in connection with some definite project. At the time this offer was made I was already laboring under so many professional and personal burdens that, with a weary hand, I simply deposited the envelope and its contents in a drawer, never to be consulted again.

Some months later, however, I made an impulsive digression from my responsibilities and, rather haphazardly, took up the Mirocaw project. This happened as I was driving north one afternoon in late summer with the intention of examining some journals in the holdings of a library at another university. Once out of the city limits the scenery changed to sunny fields and farms, diverting my thoughts from the signs that I passed along the highway. Neverthe-

less, the subconscious scholar in me must have been regarding these with studious care. The name of a town loomed into my vision. Instantly the scholar retrieved certain records from some deep mental drawer, and I was faced with making a few hasty calculations as to whether there was enough time and motivation for an investigative side trip. But the exit sign was even hastier in making its appearance, and I soon found myself leaving the highway, recalling the road sign' s promise that the town was no more than seven miles east.

These seven miles included several confusing turns, the forced taking of a temporarily alternate route, and a destination not even visible until a steep rise had been fully ascended. On the descent another helpful sign informed me that I was within the city limits of Mirocaw. Some scattered houses on the outskirts of the town were the first structures I encountered. Beyond them the numerical highway became Townshend Street, the main avenue of Mirocaw.

The town impressed me as being much larger once I was within its limits than it had appeared from the prominence just outside. I saw that the general hilliness of the surrounding countryside was also an internal feature of Mirocaw. Here, though, the effect was different. The parts of the town did not look as if they adhered very well to one another. This condition might be blamed on the irregular topography of the town. Behind some of the old stores in the business district, steeply roofed houses had been erected on a sudden incline, their peaks appearing at an extraordinary elevation above the lower buildings. And because the foundations of these houses could not be glimpsed, they conveyed the illusion of being either precariously suspended in air, threaten-

ing to topple down, or else constructed with an unnatural loftiness in relation to their width and mass. This situation also created a weird distortion of perspective. The two levels of structures overlapped each other without giving a sense of depth, so that the houses, because of their higher elevation and nearness to the foreground buildings, did not appear diminished in size as background objects should. Consequently, a look of flatness, as in a photograph, predominated in this area. Indeed, Mirocaw could be compared to an album of old snapshots, particularly ones in which the camera had been upset in the process of photography, causing the pictures to develop on an angle: a cone-roofed turret, like a pointed hat jauntily askew, peeked over the houses on a neighboring street; a billboard displaying a group of grinning vegetables tipped its contents slightly westward; cars parked along steep curbs seemed to be flying skyward in the glare-distorted windows of a five-and-ten; people leaned lethargically as they trod up and down sidewalks; and on that sunny day the clock tower, which at first I mistook for a church steeple, cast a long shadow that seemed to extend an impossible distance and wander into unlikely places in its progress across the town. I should say that perhaps the disharmonies of Mirocaw are more acutely affecting my imagination in retrospect than they were on that first day, when I was primarily concerned with locating the city hall or some other center of information.

I pulled around a corner and parked. Sliding over to the other side of the seat, I rolled down the window and called to a passerby: “Excuse me, sir,” I said. The man, who was shabbily dressed and very old, paused for a moment without approaching the car. Though he had apparently responded

to my call, his vacant expression did not betray the least awareness of my presence, and for a moment I thought it just a coincidence that he halted on the sidewalk at the same time I addressed him. His eyes were focused somewhere beyond me with a weary and imbecilic gaze. After a few moments he continued on his way and I said nothing to call him back, even though at the last second his face began to appear dimly familiar. Someone else finally came along who was able to direct me to the Mirocaw City Hall and Community Center.

The city hall turned out to be the building with the clock tower. Inside I stood at a counter behind which some people were working at desks and walking up and down a back hallway. On one wall was a poster for the state lottery: a jack-in-the-box with both hands grasping green bills. After a few moments, a tall, middle-aged woman came over to the counter.

“Can I help you?” she asked in a neutral, bureaucratic voice.

I explained that I had heard about the festival—saying nothing about being a nosy academic—and asked if she could provide me with further information or direct me to someone who could.

“Do you mean the one held in the winter?” she asked. “How many of them are there?”

“Just that one.”

“I suppose, then, that that's the one I mean.” I smiled as if sharing a joke with her.

Without another word, she walked off into the back hallway. While she was absent I exchanged glances with several

of the people behind the counter who periodically looked up from their work.

"There you are," she said when she returned, handing me a piece of paper that looked like the product of a cheap copy machine. *Please Come to the Fun*, it said in large letters. *Parades*, it went on, *Street Masquerade*, *Bands*, *The Winter Raffle*, and *The Coronation of the Winter Queen*.

The page continued with the mention of a number of miscellaneous festivities. I read the words again. There was something about that imploring little "please" at the top of the announcement that made the whole affair seem like a charity function.

"When is it held? It doesn't say when the festival takes place."

"Most people already know that." She abruptly snatched the page from my hands and wrote something at the bottom. When she gave it back to me, I saw "Dec. 19-21" written in blue-green ink. I was immediately struck by an odd sense of scheduling on the part of the festival committee. There was, of course, solid anthropological and historical precedent for holding festivities around the winter solstice, but the timing of this particular event did not seem entirely practical.

"If you don't mind my asking, don't these days somewhat conflict with the regular holiday season? I mean, most people have enough going on at that time."

"It's just tradition," she said, as if invoking some venerable ancestry behind her words.

"That's very interesting," I said as much to myself as to her.

"Is there anything else?" she asked.

“Yes. Could you tell me if this festival has anything to do with clowns? I see there's something about a masquerade.”

”Yes, of course there are some people in... costumes. I've never been in that position myself... that is, yes, there are clowns of a sort.”

At that point my interest was definitely aroused, but

I was not sure how much further I wanted to pursue it.

I thanked the woman for her help and asked the best means of access to the highway, not anxious to retrace the labyrinthine route by which I had entered the town. I walked back to my car with a whole flurry of half-formed questions, and as many vague and conflicting answers, cluttering my mind.

The directions the woman gave me necessitated passing through the south end of Mirocaw. There were not many people moving about in this section of town. Those that I did see, shuffling lethargically down a block of battered storefronts, exhibited the same sort of forlorn expression and manner as the old man from whom I had asked directions earlier. I must have been traversing a central artery of this area, for on either side stretched street after street of poorly tended yards and houses bowed with age and indifference. When I came to a stop at a street corner, one of the citizens of this slum passed in front of my car. This lean, morose, and epicene person turned my way and sneered outrageously with a taut little mouth, yet seemed to be looking at no one in particular. After progressing a few streets farther, I came to a road that led back to the highway. I felt detectably more comfortable as soon as I found myself traveling once again through the expanses of sun-drenched farmlands.

I reached the library with more than enough time for my research, and so I decided to make a scholarly detour to see what material I could find that might illuminate the winter festival held in Mirocaw. The library, one of the oldest in the state, included in its holdings the entire run of the Mirocaw Courier. I thought this would be an excellent place to start. I soon found, however, that there was no handy way to research information from this newspaper, and I did not want to engage in a blind search for articles concerning a specific subject.

I next turned to the more organized resources of the newspapers for the larger cities located in the same county, which incidentally shares its name with Mirocaw. I uncovered very little about the town, and almost nothing concerning its festival, except in one general article on annual events in the area that erroneously attributed to Mirocaw a "large Middle-Eastern community" which every spring hosted a kind of ethnic jamboree. From what I had already observed, and from what I subsequently learned, the citizens of Mirocaw were solidly midwestern American, the probable descendants in a direct line from some enterprising pack of New Englanders of the last century. There was one brief item devoted to a Mirocavian event, but this merely turned out to be an obituary notice for an old woman who had quietly taken her life around Christmastime. Thus, I returned home that day all but empty-handed on the subject of Mirocaw.

However, it was not long afterward that I received another letter from the former colleague of mine who had first led me to seek out Mirocaw and its festival. As it happened, he rediscovered the article that caused him to stir my in-

terest in a local “Fool's Feast.” This article had its sole appearance in an obscure festschrift of anthropology studies published in Amsterdam twenty years ago. Most of these papers were in Dutch, a few in German, and only one was in English: “The Last Feast of Harlequin: Preliminary Notes on a Local Festival.” It was exciting, of course, finally to be able to read this study, but even more exciting was the name of its author: Dr. Raymond Thoss.

2.

Before proceeding any further, I should mention something about Thoss, and inevitably about myself. Over two decades ago, at my alma mater in Cambridge, Mass., Thoss was a professor of mine. Long before playing a role in the events I am about to describe, he was already one of the most important figures in my life. A striking personality, he inevitably influenced everyone who came in contact with him. I remember his lectures on social anthropology, how he turned that dim room into a brilliant and profound circus of learning. He moved in an uncannily brisk manner. When he swept his arm around to indicate some common term on the blackboard behind him, one felt he was presenting nothing less than an item of fantastic qualities and secret value. When he replaced his hand in the pocket of his old jacket this fleeting magic was once again stored away in its well-worn pouch, to be retrieved at the sorcerer's discretion. We sensed he was teaching us more than we could possibly learn, and that he himself was in possession of greater and deeper knowledge than he could possibly impart. On one occasion I summoned up the audacity to offer an interpretation-which was somewhat opposed to his own-regarding the

tribal clowns of the Hopi Indians. I implied that personal experience as an amateur clown and special devotion to this study provided me with an insight possibly more valuable than his own. It was then he disclosed, casually and very obiter dicta, that he had actually acted in the role of one of these masked tribal fools and had celebrated with them the dance of the kachinas. In revealing these facts, however, he somehow managed not to add to the humiliation I had already inflicted upon myself. And for this I was grateful to him.

Thoss's activities were such that he sometimes became the object of gossip or romanticized speculation. He was a fieldworker par excellence, and his ability to insinuate himself into exotic cultures and situations, thereby gaining insights where other anthropologists merely collected data, was renowned. At various times in his career there had been rumors of his having “gone native” a la the Frank Hamilton Cushing legend. There were hints, which were not always irresponsible or cheaply glamorized, that he was involved in projects of a freakish sort, many of which focused on New England. It is a fact that he spent six months posing as a mental patient at an institution in western Massachussetts, gathering information on the “culture” of the psychically disturbed. When his book “Winter Solstice: The Longest Night of a Society” was published, the general opinion was that it was disappointingly subjective and impressionistic, and that, aside from a few moving but “poetically obscure” observations, there was nothing at all to give it value. Those who defended Thoss claimed he was a kind of super-anthropologist: while much of his work emphasized his own mind and feelings, his experience had in fact penetrated to a rich

core of hard data which he had yet to disclose in objective discourse. As a student of Thoss, I tended to support this latter estimation of him. For a variety of tenable and untenable reasons, I believed Thoss capable of unearthing hitherto inaccessible strata of human existence. So it was gratifying at first that this article entitled “The Last Feast of Harlequin” seemed to uphold the Thoss mystique, and in an area I personally found captivating.

Much of the content of the article I did not immediately comprehend, given its author's characteristic and often strategic obscurities. On first reading, the most interesting aspect of this brief study-the “notes” encompassed only twenty pages was the general mood of the piece. Thoss's eccentricities were definitely present in these pages, but only as a struggling inner force which was definitely contained-incarcerated, I might say-by the somber rhythmic movements of his prose and by some gloomy references he occasionally called upon. Two references in particular shared a common theme. One was a quotation from Poe's “The Conqueror Worm,” which Thoss employed as a rather sensational epigraph. The point of the epigraph, however, was nowhere echoed in the text of the article save in another passing reference. Thoss brought up the well-known genesis of the modern Christmas celebration, which of course descends from the Roman Saturnalia.

Then, making it clear he had not yet observed the Mirocaw festival and had only gathered its nature from various informants, he established that it too contained many, even more overt, elements of the Saturnalia. Next he made what seemed to me a trivial and purely linguistic observation, one that had less to do with his main course of argu-

ment than it did with the equally peripheral Poe epigraph. He briefly mentioned that an early sect of the Syrian Gnostics called themselves “Saturnians” and believed, among other religious heresies, that mankind was created by angels who were in turn created by the Supreme Unknown. The angels, however, did not possess the power to make their creation an erect being and for a time he crawled upon the earth like a worm. Eventually, the Creator remedied this grotesque state of affairs. At the time I supposed that the symbolic correspondences of mankind's origins and ultimate condition being associated with worms, combined with a year-end festival recognizing the winter death of the earth, was the gist of this Thossian “insight,” a poetic but Scientifically valueless observation.

Other observations he made on the Mirocaw festival were also strictly etic; in other words, they were based on second-hand sources, hearsay testimony. Even at that juncture, however, I felt Thoss knew more than he disclosed; and, as I later discovered, he had indeed included information on certain aspects of Mirocaw suggesting he was already in possession of several keys which for the moment he was keeping securely in his own pocket. By then I myself possessed a most revealing morsel of knowledge. A note to the “Harlequin” article apprised the reader that the piece was only a fragment in rude form of a more wide-ranging work in preparation. This work was never seen by the world. My former professor had not published anything since his withdrawal from academic circulation some twenty years ago. Now I suspected where he had gone.

For the man I had stopped on the streets of Mirocaw and from whom I tried to obtain directions, the man with the

disconcertingly lethargic gaze, had very much resembled a superannuated version of Dr. Raymond Thoss.

3.

And now I have a confession to make. Despite my reasons for being enthusiastic about Mirocaw and its mysteries, especially its relationship to both Thoss and my own deepest concerns as a scholar-I contemplated the days ahead of me with no more than a feeling of frigid numbness and often with a sense of profound depression.

Yet I had no reason to be surprised at this emotional state, which had little relevance to the outward events in my life but was determined by inward conditions that worked according to their own, quite enigmatic, seasons and cycles. For many years, at least since my university days, I have suffered from this dark malady, this recurrent despondency in which I would become buried when it came time for the earth to grow cold and bare and the skies heavy with shadows. Nevertheless, I pursued my plans, though somewhat mechanically, to visit Mirocaw during its festival days, for I superstitiously hoped that this activity might diminish the weight of my seasonal despair. In Mirocaw would be parades and parties and the opportunity to play the clown once again.

For weeks in advance I practiced my art, even perfecting a new feat of juggling magic, which was my special forté in foolery. I had my costumes cleaned, purchased fresh makeup, and was ready. I received permission from the university to cancel some of my classes prior to the holiday, explaining the nature of my project and the necessity of arriving in the town a few days before the festival began, in order

to do some preliminary research, establish informants, and so on. Actually, my plan was to postpone any formal inquiry until after the festival and to involve myself beforehand as much as possible in its activities. I would, of course, keep a journal during this time.

There was one resource I did want to consult, however.

Specifically, I returned to that outstate library to examine those issues of the Mirocaw Courier dating from December two decades ago. One story in particular confirmed a point Thoss made in the “Harlequin” article, though the event it chronicled must have taken place after Thoss had written his study.

The Courier story appeared two weeks after the festival had ended for that year and was concerned with the disappearance of a woman named Elizabeth Beadle, the wife of Samuel Beadle, a hotel owner in Mirocaw.

The county authorities speculated that this was another instance of the “holiday suicides” which seemed to occur with inordinate seasonal regularity in the Mirocaw region. Thoss documented this phenomenon in his “Harlequin” article, though I suspect that today these deaths would be neatly categorized under the heading “seasonal affective disorder”. In any case, the authorities searched a half-frozen lake near the outskirts of Mirocaw where they had found many successful suicides in years past. This year, however, no body was discovered. Alongside the article was a picture of Elizabeth Beadle. Even in the grainy microfilm reproduction one could detect a certain vibrancy and vitality in Mrs. Beadle's face. That an hypothesis of “holiday suicide” should be so readily posited to explain her disappearance seemed strange and in some way unjust.

Thoss, in his brief article, wrote that every year there occurred changes of a moral or spiritual cast which seemed to affect Mirocaw along with the usual winter metamorphosis. He was not precise about its origin or nature but stated, in typically mystifying fashion, that the effect of this “subseason” on the town was conspicuously negative. In addition to the number of suicides actually accomplished during this time, there was also a rise in treatment of “hypochondriacal” conditions, which was how the medical men of twenty years past characterized these cases in discussions with Thoss. This state of affairs would gradually worsen and finally reach a climax during the days scheduled for the Mirocaw festival. Thoss speculated that given the secretive nature of small towns, the situation was probably even more intensely pronounced than casual investigation could reveal.

The connection between the festival and this insidious subseasonal climate in Mirocaw was a point on which Thoss did not come to any rigid conclusions. He did write, nevertheless, that these two “climatic aspects” had had a parallel existence in the town's history as far back as available records could document. A late nineteenth century history of Mirocaw County speaks of the town by its original name of New Colstead, and castigates the townspeople for holding a “ribald and soulless feast” to the exclusion of normal Christmas observances. (Thoss comments that the historian had mistakenly fused two distinct aspects of the season, their actual relationship being essentially antagonistic.) The “Harlequin” article did not trace the festival to its earliest appearance (this may not have been possible), though Thoss emphasized the New England origins of Mirocaw's founders. The festival, therefore, was one imported from this region

and could reasonably be extended at least a century; that is, if it had not been brought over from the Old World, in which case its roots would become indefinite until further research could be done. Surely Thoss's allusion to the Syrian Gnostics suggested the latter possibility could not entirely be ruled out.

But it seemed to be the festival's link to New England that nourished Thoss's speculations. He wrote of this patch of geography as if it were an acceptable place to end the search. For him, the very words “New England” seemed to be stripped of all traditional connotations and had come to imply nothing less than a gateway to all lands, both known and suspected, and even to ages beyond the civilized history of the region. Having been educated partly in New England, I could somewhat understand this sentimental exaggeration, for indeed there are places that seem archaic beyond chronological measure, appearing to transcend relative standards of time and achieving a kind of absolute antiquity which cannot be logically fathomed. But how this vague suggestion related to a small town in the Midwest I could not imagine. Thoss himself observed that the residents of Mirocaw did not betray any mysteriously primitive consciousness. On the contrary, they appeared superficially unaware of the genesis of their winter merrymaking. That such a tradition had endured through the years, however, even eclipsing the conventional Christmas holiday, revealed a profound awareness of the festival's meaning and function.

I cannot deny that what I had learned about the Mirocaw festival did inspire a trite sense of fate, especially given the involvement of such an important figure from my past as Thoss. It was the first time in my academic career that I

knew myself to be better suited than anyone else to discern the true meaning of scattered data, even if I could only attribute this special authority to chance circumstances.

Nevertheless, as I sat in that library on a morning in mid December I doubted for a moment the wisdom of setting out for Mirocaw rather than returning home, where the more familiar rite de passage of winter depression awaited me. My original scheme was to avoid the cyclical blues the season held for me, but it seemed this was also a part of the history of Mirocaw, only on a much larger scale. My emotional instability, however, was exactly what qualified me most for the particular fieldwork ahead, though I did not take pride or consolation in the fact. And to retreat would have been to deny myself an opportunity that might never offer itself again. In retrospect, there seems to have been no fortuitous resolution to the decision I had to make. As it happened, I went ahead to the town.

4.

Just past noon, on December 18, I started driving toward Mirocaw. A blur of dull, earthen-colored scenery extended in every direction. The snowfalls of late autumn had been sparse, and only a few white patches appeared in the harvested fields along the highway. The clouds were gray and abundant. Passing by a stretch of forest, I noticed the black, ragged clumps of abandoned nests clinging to the twisted mesh of bare branches. I thought I saw black birds skittering over the road ahead, but they were only dead leaves and they flew into the air as I drove by.

I approached Mirocaw from the south, entering the town from the direction I had left it on my visit the previous sum-

mer. This took me once again through that part of town which seemed to exist on the wrong side of some great invisible barrier dividing the desirable sections of Mirocaw from the undesirable. As lurid as this district had appeared to me under the summer sun, in the thin light of that winter afternoon it degenerated into a pale phantom of itself. The frail stores and starved-looking houses suggested a borderline region between the material and nonmaterial worlds, with one sardonically wearing the mask of the other. I saw a few gaunt pedestrians who turned as I passed by, though seemingly not because I passed by, making my way up to the main street of Mirocaw.

Driving up the steep rise of Townshend Street, I found the sights there comparatively welcoming. The rolling avenues of the town were in readiness for the festival. Streetlights had their poles raveled with evergreen, the fresh boughs proudly conspicuous in a barren season. On the doors of many of the businesses on Townshend were holly wreaths, equally green but observably plastic.

However, although there was nothing unusual in this traditional greenery of the season, it soon became apparent to me that Mirocaw had quite abandoned itself to this particular symbol of Yuletide. It was garishly in evidence everywhere. The windows of stores and houses were framed in green lights, green streamers hung down from storefront awnings, and the beacons of the Red Rooster Bar were peacock green floodlights. I supposed the residents of Mirocaw desired these decorations, but the effect was one of excess. An eerie emerald haze permeated the town, and faces looked slightly reptilian.

At the time I assumed that the prodigious evergreen, holly wreaths, and colored lights (if only of a single color) demonstrated an emphasis on the vegetable symbols of the Nordic Yuletide, which would inevitably be muddled into the winter festival of any northern country just as they had been adopted for the Christmas season. In his “Harlequin” article Thoss wrote of the pagan aspect of Mirocaw's festival, likening it to the ritual of a fertility cult, with probable connections to chthonic divinities at some time in the past. But Thoss had mistaken, as I had, what was only part of the festival's significance for the whole.

The hotel at which I had made reservations was located on Townshend. It was an old building of brown brick, with an arched doorway and a pathetic coping intended to convey an impression of neoclassicism. I found a parking space in front and left my suitcases in the car.

When I first entered the hotel lobby it was empty. I thought perhaps the Mirocaw festival would have attracted enough visitors to at least bolster the business of its only hotel, but it seemed I was mistaken. Tapping a little bell, I leaned on the desk and turned to look at a small, traditionally decorated Christmas tree on a table near the entranceway. It was complete with shiny, egg-fragile bulbs; miniature candy canes; flat, laughing Santas with arms wide; a star on top nodding awkwardly against the delicate shoulder of an upper branch; and colored lights that bloomed out of flower-shaped sockets. For some reason this seemed to me a sorry little piece.

“May I help you?” said a young woman arriving from a room adjacent to the lobby.

I must have been staring rather intently at her, for she looked away and seemed quite uneasy. I could hardly imagine what to say to her or how to explain what I was thinking. In person she immediately radiated a chilling brilliance of manner and expression. But if this woman had not committed suicide twenty years before, as the newspaper article had suggested, neither had she aged in that time.

“Sarah,” called a masculine voice from the invisible heights of a stairway. A tall, middle-aged man came down the steps. “I thought you were in your room,” said the man, whom I took to be Samuel Beadle. Sarah, not Elizabeth, Beadle glanced sideways in my direction to indicate to her father that she was conducting the business of the hotel. Beadle apologized to me, and then excused the two of them for a moment while they went off to one side to continue their exchange.

I smiled and pretended everything was normal, while trying to remain within earshot of their conversation. They spoke in tones that suggested their conflict was a familiar one: Beadle's overprotective concern with his daughter's whereabouts and Sarah's frustrated understanding of certain restrictions placed upon her. The conversation ended, and Sarah ascended the stairs, turning for a moment to give me a facial pantomime of apology for the unprofessional scene that had just taken place.

“Now, sir, what can I do for you?” Beadle asked, almost demanded.

“Yes, I have a reservation. Actually, I'm a day early, if that doesn't present a problem.” I gave the hotel the benefit of the doubt that its business might have been secretly flourishing.

“No problem at all, sir,” he said, presenting me with the registration form, and then a brass-colored key dangling from a plastic disc bearing the number 44.

“Luggage?”

“Yes, it's in my car.”

“I'll give you a hand with that.”

While Beadle was settling me in my fourth-floor room it seemed an opportune moment to broach the subject of the festival, the holiday suicides, and perhaps, depending upon his reaction, the fate of his wife. I needed a respondent who had lived in the town for a good many years and who could enlighten me about the attitude of Mirocavians toward their season of sea-green lights.

“This is just fine,” I said about the clean but somber room. “Nice view. I can see the bright green lights of Mirocaw just fine from up here. Is the town usually all decked out like this? For the festival, I mean.”

“Yes, sir, for the festival,” he replied mechanically.

“I imagine you'll probably be getting quite a few of us out-of-towners in the next couple days.”

“Could be. Is there anything else?”

“Yes, there is. I wonder if you could tell me something about the festivities.”

“Such as…”

“Well, you know, the clowns and so forth.”

“Only clowns here are the ones that're… well, picked out, I suppose you would say.”

“I don't understand.”

“Excuse me, sir. I'm very busy right now. Is there anything else?”

I could think of nothing at the moment to perpetuate our conversation. Beadle wished me a good stay and left.

I unpacked my suitcases. In addition to regular clothing I had also brought along some of the items from my clown's wardrobe. Beadle's comment that the clowns of Mirocaw were “picked out” left me wondering exactly what purpose these street masqueraders served in the festival. The clown figure has had so many meanings in different times and cultures. The jolly, well-loved joker familiar to most people is actually but one aspect of this protean creature. Madmen, hunchbacks, amputees, and other abnormals were once considered natural clowns; they were elected to fulfil a comic role which could allow others to see them as ludicrous rather than as terrible reminders of the forces of disorder in the world. But sometimes a cheerless jester was required to draw attention to this same disorder, as in the case of King Lear's morbid and honest fool, who of course was eventually hanged, and so much for his clownish wisdom. Clowns have often had ambiguous and sometimes contradictory roles to play. Thus, I knew enough not to brashly jump into costume and cry out, “Here I am again!”

That first day in Mirocaw I did not stray far from the hotel. I read and rested for a few hours and then ate at a nearby diner. Through the window beside my table I watched the winter night turn the soft green glow of the town into a harsh and almost totally new color as it contrasted with the darkness. The streets of Mirocaw seemed to me unusually busy for a small town at evening. Yet it was not the kind of activity one normally sees before an approaching Christmas holiday. This was not a crowd of bustling shoppers loaded with bright bags of presents. Their arms were

empty, their hands shoved deep in their pockets against the cold, which nevertheless had not driven them to the solitude of their presumably warm houses. I watched them enter and exit store after store without buying; many merchants remained open late, and even the places that were closed had left their neons illuminated. The faces that passed the window of the diner were possibly just stiffened by the cold, I thought; frozen into deep frowns and nothing else. In the same window I saw the reflection of my own face. It was not the face of an adept clown; it was slack and flabby and at that moment seemed the face of someone less than alive. Outside was the town of Mirocaw, its streets dipping and rising with a lunatic severity, its citizens packing the sidewalks, its heart bathed in green: as promising a field of professional and personal challenge as I had ever encountered and I was bored to the point of dread. I hurried back to my hotel room.

"Mirocaw has another coldness within its cold," I wrote in my journal that night. "Another set of buildings and streets that exists behind the visible town's façade like a world of disgraceful back alleys." I went on like this for about a page, across which I finally engraved a big "X". Then I went to bed.

In the morning I left my car at the hotel and walked toward the main business district a few blocks away. Mingling with the good people of Mirocaw seemed like the proper thing to do at that point in my scientific sojourn. But as I began laboriously walking up Townshend (the sidewalks were cramped with wandering pedestrians), a glimpse of someone suddenly replaced my haphazard plan with a more specific and immediate one. Through the crowd and about fifteen paces ahead was my goal.

“Dr. Thoss,” I called.

His head almost seemed to turn and look back in response to my shout, but I could not be certain. I pushed past several warmly wrapped bodies and green-scarved necks, only to find that the object of my pursuit appeared to be maintaining the same distance from me, though I did not know if this was being done deliberately or not. At the next corner, the dark-coated Thoss abruptly turned right onto a steep street which led downward directly toward the dilapidated south end of Mirocaw. When I reached the corner I looked down the sidewalk and could see him very clearly from above. I also saw how he managed to stay so far ahead of me in a mob that had impeded my own progress. For some reason the people on the sidewalk made room so that he could move past them easily, without the usual jostling of bodies. It was not a dramatic physical avoidance, thought it seemed nonetheless intentional. Fighting the tight fabric of the throng, I continued to follow Thoss, losing and regaining sight of him.

By the time I reached the bottom of the sloping street the crowd had thinned out considerably, and after walking a block or so farther I found myself practically a lone pedestrian pacing behind a distant figure that I hoped was still Thoss. He was now walking quite swiftly and in a way that seemed to acknowledge my pursuit of him, though really it felt as if he were leading me as much as I was chasing him. I called his name a few more times at a volume he could not have failed to hear, assuming that deafness was not one of the changes to have come over him; he was, after all, not a young man, nor even a middle-aged one any longer.

Thoss suddenly crossed in the middle of the street. He walked a few more steps and entered a signless brick building between a liquor store and a repair shop of some kind. In the "Harlequin" article Thoss had mentioned that the people living in this section of Mirocaw maintained their own businesses, and that these were patronized almost exclusively by residents of the area. I could well believe this statement when I looked at these little sheds of commerce, for they had the same badly weathered appearance as their clientele. The formidable shoddiness of these buildings notwithstanding, I followed Thoss into the plain brick shell of what had been, or possibly still was, a diner.

Inside it was unusually dark. Even before my eyes made the adjustment I sensed that this was not a thriving restaurant cozily cluttered with chairs and tables as was the establishment where I had eaten the night before but a place with only a few disarranged furnishings, and very cold. It seemed colder, in fact, than the winter streets outside.

"Dr. Thoss?" I called toward a lone table near the center of the long room. Perhaps four or five were sitting around the table, with some others blending into the dimness behind them. Scattered across the top of the table were some books and loose papers. Seated there was an old man indicating something in the pages before him, but it was not Thoss. Beside him were two youths whose wholesome features distinguished them from the grim weariness of the others. I approached the table and they all looked up at me. None of them showed a glimmer of emotion except the two boys, who exchanged worried and guilt-ridden glances with each other, as if they had just been discovered in some shameful act. They both suddenly burst from the table and ran into

the dark background, where a light appeared briefly as they exited by a back door.

“I'm sorry,” I said diffidently. “I thought I saw someone I knew come in here.”

They said nothing. Out of a back room others began to emerge, no doubt interested in the source of the commotion. In a few moments the room was crowded with these tramp-like figures, all of them gazing emptily in the dimness. I was not at this point frightened of them; at least I was not afraid they would do me any physical harm. Actually, I felt as if it was quite within my power to pummel them easily into submission, their mousy faces almost inviting a succession of firm blows. But there were so many of them.

They slid slowly toward me in a worm-like mass. Their eyes seemed empty and unfocused, and I wondered

a moment if they were even aware of my presence. Nevertheless, I was the center upon which their lethargic shuffling converged, their shoes scuffing softly along the bare floor. I began to deliver a number of hasty inanities as they continued to press toward me, their weak and unexpectedly odorless bodies nudging against mine.

(I understood now why the people along the sidewalks seemed to instinctively avoid Thoss.) Unseen legs became entangled with my own; I staggered and then regained my balance. This sudden movement aroused me from a kind of mesmeric daze into which I must have fallen without being aware of it. I had intended to leave that dreary place long before events had reached such a juncture, but for some reason I could not focus my intentions strongly enough to cause myself to act. My mind had been drifting farther away as these

slavish things approached. In a sudden surge of panic I pushed through their soft ranks and was outside.

The open air revived me to my former alertness, and I immediately started pacing swiftly up the hill. I was no longer sure that I had not simply imagined what had seemed, and at the same time did not seem, like a perilous moment. Had their movements been directed toward a harmful assault, or were they trying merely to intimidate me? As I reached the green-glazed main street of Mirocaw I really could not determine what had just happened.

The sidewalks were still jammed with a multitude of pedestrians, who now seemed more lively than they had been only a short time before. There was a kind of vitality that could only be attributed to the imminent festivities.

A group of young men had begun celebrating prematurely and strode noisily across the street at midpoint, obviously intoxicated. From the laughter and joking among the still sober citizens I gathered that, mardi-gras style, public drunkenness was within the traditions of this winter festival. I looked for anything to indicate the beginnings of the Street Masquerade, but saw nothing: no brightly garbed harlequins or snow-white pierrots. Were the ceremonies even now in preparation for the coronation of the Winter Queen? "The Winter Queen," I wrote in my journal. "Figure of fertility invested with symbolic powers of revival and prosperity. Elected in the manner of a high school prom queen. Check for possible consort figure in the form of a representative from the underworld."

In the pre-darkness hours of December 19 I sat in my hotel room and wrote and thought and organized. I did not feel too badly, all things considered. The holiday excitement

which was steadily rising in the streets below my window was definitely infecting me. I forced myself to take a short nap in anticipation of a long night. When I awoke, Mirocaw's annual feast had begun.

5.

Shouting, commotion, carousing. Sleepily I went to the window and looked out over the town. It seemed all the lights of Mirocaw were shining, save in that section down the hill which became part of the black void of winter. And now the town's greenish tinge was even more pronounced, spreading everywhere like a great green rainbow that had melted from the sky and endured, phosphorescent, into the night. In the streets was the brightness of an artificial spring. The byways of Mirocaw vibrated with activity: on a nearby corner a brass band blared; marauding cars blew their horns and were sometimes mounted by laughing pedestrians; a man emerged from the Red Rooster Bar, threw u,p his arms, and crowed. I looked closely at the individual celebrants, searching for the vestments of clowns. Soon, delightedly, I saw them. The costume was red and white, with matching cap, and the face painted a noble alabaster. It almost seemed to be a clownish incarnation of that white-bearded and black-booted Christmas fool.

This particular fool, however, was not receiving the affection and respect usually accorded to a Santa Claus. My poor fellow-clown was in the middle of a circle of revelers who were pushing him back and forth from one to the other. The object of this abuse seemed to accept it somewhat willingly, but this little game nevertheless appeared to have humiliation as its purpose. “Only clowns here are the one's that're

picked out," echoed Beadle's voice in my memory. "Picked on" seemed closer to the truth.

Packing myself in some heavy clothes, I went out into the green gleaming streets. Not far from the hotel I was stumbled into by a character with a wide blue and red grin and bright baggy clothes. Actually he had been shoved into me by some youths outside a drugstore.

"See the freak," said an obese and drunken fellow. "See the freak fall."

My first response was anger, and then fear as I saw two others flanking the fat drunk. They walked toward me and I tensed myself for a confrontation.

"This is a disgrace," one said, the neck of a wine bottle held loosely in his left hand.

But it was not to me they were speaking; it was to the clown, who had been pushed to the sidewalk. His three persecutors helped him up with a sudden jerk and then splashed wine in his face. They ignored me altogether.

"Let him loose," the fat one said. "Crawl away, freak. Oh, he flies!"

The clown trotted off, becoming lost in the throng. "Wait a minute," I said to the rowdy trio, who had started lumbering away. I quickly decided that it would probably be futile to ask them to explain what I had just witnessed, especially amid the noise and confusion of the festivities. In my best jovial fashion I proposed we all go someplace where I could buy them each a drink. They had no objection and in a short while we were all squeezed around a table in the Red Rooster.

Over several drinks I explained to them that I was from out of town, which pleased them no end for some reason. I

told them there were things I did not understand about their festival.

“I don't think there's anything to understand,” the fat one said. “It's just what you see.”

I asked him about the people dressed as clowns. “Them? They're the freaks. It's their turn this year.

Everyone takes their turn. Next year it might be mine. Or yours,” he said, pointing at one of his friends across the table. “And when we find out which one you are—”

“You're not smart enough,” said the defiant potential freak.

This was an important point: the fact that individuals who played the clowns remain, or at least attempted to remain, anonymous. This arrangement would help remove inhibitions a resident of Mirocaw might have about abusing his own neighbor or even a family relation. From what I later observed, the extent of this abuse did not go beyond a kind of playful roughhousing. And even so, it was only the occasional group of rowdies who actually took advantage of this aspect of the festival, the majority of the citizens very much content to stay on the sidelines.

As far as being able to illuminate the meaning of this custom, my three young friends were quite useless. To them it was just amusement, as I imagine it was to the majority of Mirocavians. This was understandable. I suppose the average person would not be able to explain exactly how the profoundly familiar Christmas holiday came to be celebrated in its present form.

I left the bar alone and not unaffected by the drinks I had consumed there. Outside, the general merrymaking continued. Loud music emanated from several quarters. Mirocaw

had fully transformed itself from a sedate small town to an enclave of Saturnalia within the dark immensity of a winter night. But Saturn is also the planetary symbol of melancholy and sterility, a clash of opposites contained within that single word. And as I wandered half-drunkenly down the street, I discovered that there was a conflict within the winter festival itself. This discovery indeed appeared to be that secret key which Thoss withheld in his study of the town. Oddly enough, it was through my unfamiliarity with the outward nature of the festival that I came to know its true nature.

I was mingling with the crowd on the street, warmly enjoying the confusion around me, when I saw a strangely designed creature lingering on the corner up ahead. It was one of the Mirocaw clowns. Its clothes were shabby and nondescript, almost in the style of a tramp-type clown, but not humorously exaggerated enough. The face, though, made up for the lackluster costume. I had never seen such a strange conception for a clown's countenance. The figure stood beneath a dim streetlight, and when it turned its head my way I realized why it seemed familiar. The thin, smooth, and pale head; the wide eyes; the oval-shaped features resembling nothing so much as the skull-faced, screaming creature in that famous painting (memory fails me). This clownish imitation rivalled the original in suggesting stricken realms of abject horror and despair: an inhuman likeness more proper to something under the earth than upon it.

From the first moment I saw this creature, I thought of those inhabitants of the ghetto down the hill. There was the same nauseating passivity and languor in its bearing. Perhaps if I had not been drinking earlier I would not have been

bold enough to take the action I did. I decided to join in one of the upstanding traditions of the winter festival, for it annoyed me to see this morbid impostor of a clown standing up. When I reached the corner I laughingly pushed myself into the creature "Whoops!"-who stumbled backward and ended up on the sidewalk. I laughed again and looked around for approval from the festivalers in the vicinity. No one, however, seemed to appreciate or even acknowledge what I had done.

They did not laugh with me or point with amusement, but only passed by, perhaps walking a little faster until they were some distance from this street corner incident.

I realized instantly I had violated some tacit rule of behavior, though I had thought my action well within the common practice. The idea occurred to me that I might even be apprehended and prosecuted for what in any other circumstances was certainly a criminal act. I turned around to help the clown back to his feet, hoping to somehow redeem my offense, but the creature was gone. Solemnly I walked away from the scene of my inadvertent crime and sought other streets away from its witnesses.

Along the various back avenues of Mirocaw I wandered, pausing exhaustedly at one point to sit at the counter of a small sandwich shop that was packed with customers.

I ordered a cup of coffee to revive my overly alcoholed system. Warming my hands around the cup and sipping slowly from it, I watched the people outside as they passed the front window. It was well after midnight but the thick flow of passersby gave no indication that anyone was going home early. A carnival of profiles filed past the window and I was content simply to sit back and observe, until finally one

of these faces made me start. It was that frightful little clown I had roughed up earlier. But although its face was familiar in its ghastly aspect, there was something different about it. And I wondered that there should be two such hideous freaks.

Quickly paying the man at the counter, I dashed out to get a second glimpse of the clown, who was now nowhere in sight. The dense crowd kept me from pursuing this figure with any speed, and I wondered how the clown could have made its way so easily ahead of me. Unless the crowd had instinctively allowed this creature to pass unhindered through its massive ranks, as it did for Thoss. In the process of searching for this particular freak, I discovered that interspersed among the celebrating populous of Mirocaw, which included the sanctioned festival clowns, there was not one or two, but a considerable number of these pale, wraith-like creatures. And they all drifted along the streets unmolested by even the rowdiest of revelers. I now understood one of the taboos of the festival. These other clowns were not to be disturbed and should even be avoided, much as were the residents of the slum at the edge of town. Nevertheless, I felt instinctively that the two groups of clowns were somehow identified with each other, even if the ghetto clowns were not welcome at Mirocaw's winter festival. Indeed, they were not simply part of the community and celebrating the season in their own way. To all appearances, this group of melancholy mummers constituted nothing less than an entirely independent festival-a festival within a festival.

Returning to my room. I entered my suppositions into the journal I was keeping for this venture. The following are excerpts:

There is a superstitiousness displayed by the residents of Mirocaw with regard to these people from the slum section, particularly as they lately appear in those dreadful faces signifying their own festival. What is the relationship between these simultaneous celebrations? Did one precede the other? If so, which? My opinion at this point—and I claim no conclusiveness for it—is that Mirocaw's winter festival is the later manifestation, that it appeared after the festival of those depressingly pallid clowns, in order to cover it up or mitigate its effect. The holiday suicides come to mind, and the subclimate Thoss wrote about, the disappearance of Elizabeth Beadle twenty years ago, and my own experience with this pariah clan existing outside yet within the community. Of my own experience with this emotionally deleterious subseason

I would rather not speak at this time. Still not able to say whether or not my usual winter melancholy is the cause. On the general subject of mental health, I must consider Thoss's book about his stay in a psychiatric hospital (in western Mass., almost sure of that. Check on this book & Mirocaw's New England roots). The winter solstice is tomorrow, albeit sometime past midnight (how blurry these days and nights are becoming!). It is, of course, the day of the year in which night hours surpass daylight hours by the greatest margin. Note what this has to do with the suicides and a rise in psychic disorder. Recalling Thoss's list of documented suicides in his article, there seemed to be a recurrence of specific family names, as there very likely might be for any kind of data collected in a small town. Among these names was a Beadle or two. Perhaps, then, there is a genealogical basis for the suicides which has nothing to do with Thoss's mystical

subclimate, which is a colorful idea to be sure and one that seems fitting for this town of various outward and inward aspects, but is not a conception that can be substantiated.

One thing that seems certain, however, is the division of Mirocaw into two very distinct types of citizenry, resulting in two festivals and the appearance of similar clowns a term now used in an extremely loose sense. But there is a connection, and I believe I have some idea of what it is. I said before that the normal residents of the town regard those from the ghetto, and especially their clown figures, with superstition. Yet it's more than that: there is fear, perhaps a kind of hatred-the particular kind of hatred resulting from some powerful and irrational memory. What threatens Mirocaw I think I can very well understand. I recall the incident earlier today in that vacant diner. “Vacant” is the appropriate word here, despite its contradiction of fact. The congregation of that half-lit room formed less a presence than an absence, even considering the oppressive number of them. Those eyes, that did not or could not focus on anything, the pining lassitude of their faces, the lazy march of their feet. I was spiritually drained when I ran out of there. I then understood why these people and their activities are avoided.

I cannot question the wisdom of those ancestral Mirocavians who began the tradition of the winter festival and gave the town a pretext for celebration and social intercourse at a time when the consequences of brooding isolation are most severe, those longest and darkest days of the solstice. A mood of Christmas joviality obviously would not be sufficient to counter the menace of this season. But even so, there are still the suicides of individuals who are some-

how cut off, I imagine, from the vitalizing activities of the festival.

It is the nature of this insidious subseason that seems to determine the outward forms of Mirocaw's winter festival: the optimistic greenery in a period of gray dormancy; the fertile promise of the Winter Queen; and, most interesting to my mind, the clowns. The bright clowns of Mirocaw who are treated so badly; they appear to serve as substitute figures for those dark-eyed mummers of the slums. Since the latter are feared for some power or influence they possess, they may still be symbolically confronted and conquered through their counterparts, who are elected for precisely this function. If I am right about this, I wonder to what extent there is a conscious awareness among the town's populace of this indirect show of aggression. Those three young men I spoke with tonight did not seem to possess much insight beyond seeing that there was a certain amount of robust fun in the festival's tradition. For that matter, how much awareness is there on the other side of these two antagonistic festivals? Too horrible to think of such a thing, but I must wonder if, for all their apparent aimlessness, those inhabitants of the ghetto are not the only ones who know what they are about. No denying that behind those inhumanly limp expressions there seems to lie a kind of obnoxious intelligence.

Now I realize the confusion of my present state, but as I wobbled from street to street tonight, watching those oval-mouthed clowns, I could not help feeling that all the merry-making in Mirocaw was somehow allowed only by their sufferance. This I hope is no more than a fanciful Thossian intuition, the sort of idea that is curious and thought-provok-

ing without ever seeming to gain the benefit of proof. I know my mind is not entirely lucid, but I feel that it may be possible to penetrate Mirocaw's many complexities and illuminate the hidden side of the festival season. In particular I must look for the significance of the other festival. Is it also some kind of fertility celebration? From what I have seen, the tenor of this “celebrating” sub-group is one of anti-fertility, if anything. How have they managed to keep from dying out completely over the years? How do they maintain their numbers?

But I was too tired to formulate any more of my sodden speculations. Falling onto my bed, I soon became lost in dreams of streets and faces.

6.

I was, of course, slightly hung over when I woke up late the next morning. The festival was still going strong, and blaring music outside roused me from a nightmare. It was a parade. A number of floats proceeded down Townshend, a familiar color predominating. There were theme floats of pilgrims and Indians, cowboys and Indians, and clowns of an orthodox type. In the middle of it all was the Winter Queen herself, freezing atop an icy throne. She waved in all directions. I even imagined she waved up at my dark window.

In the first few groggy moments of wakefulness I had no sympathy with my excitation of the previous night. But I discovered that my former enthusiasm had merely lain dormant, and soon returned with an even greater intensity. Never before had my mind and senses been so active during this usually inert time of year. At home

I would have been playing lugubrious old records and looking out the window quite a bit. I was terribly grateful in a completely abstract way for my commitment to a meaningful mania. And I was eager to get to work after I had had some breakfast at the coffee shop.

When I got back to my room I discovered the door was unlocked. And there was something written on the dresser mirror. The writing was red and greasy, as if done with a clown's make-up pencil—my own, I realized. I read the legend, or rather I should say riddle, several times:

"What buries itself before it is dead?" I looked at it for quite a while, very shaken at how vulnerable my holiday fortifications were. Was this supposed to be a warning of some kind? A threat to the effect that if I persisted in a certain course I would end up prematurely interred? I would have to be careful, I told myself. My resolution was to let nothing deter me from the inspired strategy I had conceived for myself. I wiped the mirror clean, for it was now needed for other purposes.

I spent the rest of the day devising a very special costume and the appropriate face to go with it. I easily shabbied up my overcoat with a torn pocket or two and a complete set of stains. Combined with blue jeans and a pair of rather scuffed-up shoes, I had a passable costume for a derelict. The face, however, was more difficult, for I had to experiment from memory. Conjuring a mental image of the screaming pierrot in that painting (The Scream, I now recall), helped me quite a bit. At nightfall I exited the hotel by the back stairway.

It was strange to walk down the crowded street in this gruesome disguise. Though I thought I would feel conspicu-

ous, the actual experience was very close, I imagined, to one of complete invisibility. No one looked at me as I strolled by, or as they strolled by, or as we strolled by each other. I was a phantom—perhaps the ghost of festivals past, or those yet to come.

I had no clear idea where my disguise would take me that night, only vague expectations of gaining the confidence of my fellow specters and possibly in some way coming to know their secrets. For a while I would simply wander around in that lackadaisical manner I had learned from them, following their lead in any way they might indicate.

And for the most part this meant doing almost nothing and doing it silently. If I passed one of my kind on the sidewalk there was no speaking, no exchange of knowing looks, no recognition at all that I was aware of. We were there on the streets of Mirocaw to create a presence and nothing more. At least this is how I came to feel about it. As I drifted along with my bodiless invisibility, I felt myself more and more becoming an empty, floating shape, seeing without being seen and walking without the interference of those grosser creatures who shared my world. It was not an experience completely without interest or even pleasure. The clown's shibboleth of “here we are again” took on a new meaning for me as I felt myself a novitiate of a more rarified order of harlequinry. And very soon the opportunity to make further progress along this path presented itself.

Going the opposite direction, down the street, a pickup truck slowly passed, gently parting a sea of zigging and zagging celebrants. The cargo in the back of this truck was curious, for it was made up entirely of my fellow sectarians. At the end of the block the truck stopped and another of them

boarded it over the back gate. One block down I saw still another get on. Then the, truck made a U-turn at an intersection and headed in my direction.

I stood at the curb as I had seen the others do. I was not sure the truck would pick me up, thinking that somehow they knew I was an imposter. The truck did, however, slow down, almost coming to a stop when it reached me. The others were crowded on the floor of the truck bed. Most of them were just staring into nothingness with the usual indifference I had come to expect from their kind. But a few actually glanced at me with some anticipation. For a second I hesitated, not sure I wanted to pursue this ruse any further. At the last moment, some impulse sent me climbing up the back of the truck and squeezing myself in among the others.

There were only a few more to pick up before the truck headed for the outskirts of Mirocaw and beyond. At first I tried to maintain a clear orientation with respect to the town. But as we took turn after turn through the darkness of narrow country roads, I found myself unable to preserve any sense of direction. The majority of the others in the back of the truck exhibited no apparent awareness of their fellow passengers. Guardedly, I looked from face to ghostly face. A few of them spoke in short whispered phrases to others close by. I could not make out what they were saying but the tone of their voices was one of innocent normalcy, as if they were not of the hardened slum-herd of Mirocaw. Perhaps, I thought, these were thrill-seekers who had disguised themselves as I had done, or, more likely, initiates of some kind. Possibly they had received prior instructions at such meetings as I had stumbled onto the day before. It was also likely

that among this crew were those very boys I had frightened into a precipitate exit from that old diner.

The truck was now speeding along a fairly open stretch of country, heading toward those higher hills that surrounded the now distant town of Mirocaw. The icy wind whipped around us, and I could not keep myself from trembling with cold. This definitely betrayed me as one of the newcomers among the group, for the two bodies that pressed against mine were rigidly still and even seemed to be radiating a frigidity of their own. I glanced ahead at the darkness into which We were rapidly progressing.

We had left all open country behind us now, and the road was enclosed by thick woods. The mass of bodies in the truck leaned into one another as we began traveling up a steep incline. Above us, at the top of the hill, were lights shining somewhere within the woods. When the road levelled off, the truck made an abrupt turn, steering into what looked like a great ditch.

There was an unpaved path, however, upon which the truck proceeded toward the glowing in the near distance.

This glowing became brighter and sharper as we approached it, flickering upon the trees and revealing stark detail where there had formerly been only smooth darkness. As the truck pulled into a clearing and came to a stop, I saw a loose assembly of figures, many of which held lanterns that beamed with a dazzling and frosty light. I stood up in the back of the truck to unboard as the others were doing. Glancing around from that height I saw approximately thirty more of those cadaverous clowns milling about. One of my fellow passengers spied me lingering in the truck and in a strangely high-pitched whisper told me to hurry, explaining

something about the “apex of darkness”. I thought again about this solstice night; it was technically the longest period of darkness of the year, even if not by a very significant margin from many other winter nights. Its true significance, though, was related to considerations having little to do with either statistics or the calendar.

I went over to the place where the others were forming into a tighter crowd, which betrayed a sense of expectancy in the subtle gestures and expressions of its individual members. Glances were now exchanged, the hand of one lightly touched the shoulder of another, and a pair of circled eyes gazed over to where two figures were setting their lanterns on the ground about six feet apart. The illumination of these lanterns revealed an opening in the earth. Eventually the awareness of everyone was focused on this roundish pit, and as if by prearranged signal we all began huddling around it. The only sounds were those of the wind and our own movements as we crushed frozen leaves and sticks underfoot.

Finally, when we had all surrounded this gaping hole, the first one jumped in, leaving our sight for a moment but then reappearing to take hold of a lantern which another handed him from above. The miniature abyss filled with light, and I could see it was no more than six feet deep. One of its walls opened into the mouth of a tunnel. The figure holding the lantern stooped a little and disappeared into the passage.

Each of us, in turn, dropped into the darkness of this pit, and every fifth one took a lantern. I kept to the back of the group, for whatever subterranean activities were going to take place, I was sure I wanted to be on their periphery. When only about ten of us remained on the ground above, I maneuvered to let four of them precede me so that as the

fifth I might receive a lantern. This was exactly how it worked out, for after I had leaped to the bottom of the hole a light was ritually handed down to me. Turning about-face, I quickly entered the passageway. At that point I shook so with cold that I was neither curious nor afraid, but only grateful for the shelter.

I entered a long, gently sloping tunnel, just high enough for me to stand upright. It was considerably warmer down there than outside in the cold darkness of the woods. After a few moments I had sufficiently thawed out so that my concerns shifted from those of physical comfort to a sudden and justified preoccupation with my survival. As I walked I held my lantern close to the sides of the tunnel. They were relatively smooth as if the passage had not been made by manual digging but had been burrowed by something which left behind a clue to its dimensions in the tunnel's size and shape. This delirious idea came to me when I recalled the message that had been left on my hotel room mirror: “What buries itself before it is dead?”

I had to hurry along to keep up with those uncanny spelunkers who preceded me. The lanterns ahead bobbed with every step of their bearers, the lumbering procession seeming less and less real the farther we marched into that snug little tunnel. At some point I noticed the line ahead of me growing shorter. The processioners were emptying out into a cavernous chamber where I, too, soon arrived. This area was about thirty feet in height, its other dimensions approximating those of a large ballroom. Gazing into the distance above made me uncomfortably aware of how far we had descended into the earth. Unlike the smooth sides of the tunnel, the walls of this cavern looked jagged and irregular, as

though they had been gnawed at. The earth had been removed, I assumed, either through the tunnel from which we had emerged, or else by way of one of the many other black openings that I saw around the edges of the chamber, for possibly they too led back to the surface.

But the structure of this chamber occupied my mind a great deal less than did its occupants. There to meet us on the floor of the great cavern was what must have been the entire slum population of Mirocaw, and more, all with the same eerily wide-eyed and oval-mouthed faces. They formed a circle around an altar-like object which had some kind of dark, leathery covering draped over it. Upon the altar, another covering of the same material concealed a lumpy form beneath.

And behind this form, looking down upon the altar, was the only figure whose face was not greased with makeup.

He wore a long snowy robe that was the same color as the wispy hair berimming his head. His arms were calmly at his sides. He made no movement. The man I once believed would penetrate great secrets stood before us with the same professorial bearing that had impressed me so many years ago, yet now I felt nothing but dread at the thought of what revelations lay pocketed within the abysmal folds of his magisterial attire. Had I really come here to challenge such a formidable figure? The name by which I knew him seemed itself insufficient to designate one of his stature. Rather I should name him by his other incarnations: god of all wisdom, scribe of all sacred books, father of all magicians, thrice great and more rather I should call him Thoth.

He raised his cupped hands to his congregation and the ceremony was underway.

It was all very simple. The entire assembly, which had remained speechless until this moment, broke into the most horrendous high-pitched singing that can be imagined. It was a choir of sorrow, of shrieking delirium, and of shame. The cavern rang shrilly with the dissonant, whining chorus. My voice, too, was added to the congregation's, trying to blend with their maimed music. But my singing could not imitate theirs, having a huskiness unlike their cacophonous keening wail. To keep from exposing myself as an intruder I continued to mouth their words without sound. These words were a revelation of the moody malignancy which until then I had no more than sensed whenever in the presence of these figures. They were singing to the “unborn in paradise,” to the “pure unlived lives.” They sang a dirge for existence, for all its vital forms and seasons. Their ideals were those of darkness, chaos, and a melancholy half-existence consecrated to all the many shapes of death. A sea of thin, bloodless faces trembled and screamed with perverted hopes. And the robed, guiding figure at the heart of all this—elevated over the course of twenty years to the status of high priest—was the man from whom I had taken so many of my own life's principles. It would be useless to describe what I felt at that moment and a waste of the time I need to describe the events which followed.

The singing abruptly stopped and the towering white-haired figure began to speak. He was welcoming those of the new generation—twenty winters had passed since the “Pure Ones” had expanded their ranks. The word “pure” in this setting was a violence to what sense and composure I still retained, for nothing could have been more foul than what was to come. Thoss—and I employ this defunct identity only

as a convenience—closed his sermon and drew closer to the dark-skinned altar. Then, with all the flourish of his former life, he drew back the topmost covering. Beneath it was a limp-limbed effigy, a collapsed puppet sprawled upon the slab. I was standing toward the rear of the congregation and attempted to keep as close to the exit passage as I could. Thus, I did not see everything as clearly as I might have.

Thoss looked down upon the crooked, doll-like form and then out at the gathering. I even imagined that he made knowing eye-contact with myself. He spread his arms and a stream of continuous and unintelligible words flowed from his moaning mouth. The congregation began to stir, not greatly but perceptibly. Until that moment there was a limit to what I believed was the evil of these people. They were, after all, only that. They were merely morbid, self-tortured souls with strange beliefs. If there was anything I had learned in all my years as an anthropologist it was that the world is infinitely rich in strange ideas, even to the point where the concept of strangeness itself had little meaning for me. But with the scene I then witnessed, my conscience bounded into a realm from which it will never return.

For now was the transformation scene, the culmination of every harlequinade.

It began slowly. There was increasing movement among those on the far side of the chamber from where I stood. Someone had fallen to the floor and the others in the area backed away. The voice at the altar continued its chanting. I tried to gain a better view but there were too many of them around me. Through the mass of obstructing bodies I caught only glimpses of what was taking place.

The one who had swooned to the floor of the chamber seemed to be losing all former shape and proportion. I thought it was a clown's trick. They were clowns, were they not? I myself could make four white balls transform into four black balls as I juggled them. And this was not my most astonishing feat of clownish magic. And is there not always a sleight-of-hand inherent in all ceremonies, often dependent on the transported delusions of the celebrants? This was a good show, I thought, and giggled to myself. The transformation scene of Harlequin throwing off his fool's façade. O God, Harlequin, do not move like that! Harlequin, where are your arms? And your legs have melted together and begun squirming upon the floor. What horrible, mouthing umbilicus is that where your face should be? What is it that buries itself before it is dead? The almighty serpent of wisdom—the Conqueror Worm.

It now started happening all around the chamber.

Individual members of the congregation would gaze emptily—caught for a moment in a frozen trance and then collapse to the floor to begin the sickening metamorphosis. This happened with ever-increasing frequency the louder and more frantic Thoss chanted his insane prayer or curse.

Then there began a writhing movement toward the altar, and Thoss welcomed the things as they curled their way to the altar-top. I knew now what lax figure lay upon it.

This was Kora and Persephone, the daughter of Ceres and the Winter Queen: the child abducted into the underworld of death. Except this child had no supernatural mother to save her, no living mother at all. For the sacrifice I witnessed was an echo of one that had occurred twenty years before, the carnival feast of the preceding generation—O carne vale!

Now both mother and daughter had become victims of this subterranean sabbath. I finally realized this truth when the figure stirred upon the altar, lifted its head of icy beauty, and screamed at the sight of mute mouths closing around her.

I ran from the chamber into the tunnel. (There was nothing else that could be done, I have obsessively told myself.) Some of the others who had not yet changed began to pursue me. They would have caught up to me, I have no doubt, for I fell only a few yards into the passage. And for a moment I imagined that I too was about to undergo a transformation, but I had not been prepared as the others had been. When I heard the approaching footsteps of my pursuers I was sure there was an even worse fate facing me upon the altar. But the footsteps ceased and retreated. They had received an order in the voice of their high priest. I too heard the order, though I wish I had not, for until then I had imagined that Thoss did not remember who I was. It was that voice which taught me otherwise.

For the moment I was free to leave. I struggled to my feet and, having broken my lantern in the fall, retraced my way back through cloacal blackness.

Everything seemed to happen very quickly once I emerged from the tunnel and climbed up from the pit.

I wiped the reeking greasepaint from my face as I ran through the woods and back to the road. A passing car stopped, though I gave it no other choice except to run me down.

"Thank you for stopping."

"What the hell are you doing out here?" the driver asked. I caught my breath.

“It was a joke. The festival. Friends thought it would be funny… Please drive on.”

My ride let me off about a mile out of town, and from there I could find my way. It was the same way I had come into Mirocaw on my first visit the summer before. I stood for a while at the summit of that high hill just outside the city limits, looking down upon the busy little hamlet.

The intensity of the festival had not abated, and would not until morning. I walked down toward the welcoming glow of green, slipped through the festivities unnoticed, and returned to the hotel. No one saw me go up to my room. Indeed, there was an atmosphere of absence and abandonment throughout that building, and the desk in the lobby was unattended.

I locked the door to my room and collapsed upon the bed.

7.

When I awoke the next morning I saw from my window that the town and surrounding countryside had been visited during the night by a snowstorm, one which was entirely unpredicted. The snow was still falling on the now deserted streets of Mirocaw. The festival was over. Everyone had gone home.

And this was exactly my own intention. Any action on my part concerning what I had seen the night before would have to wait until I was away from the town. I am still not sure it will do the slightest good to speak up like this. Any accusations I could make against the slum populace of Mirocaw would be resisted, as well they should be, as unbelievable. Perhaps in a very short while none of this will be my concern.

With packed suitcases in both hands I walked up to the front desk to check out. The man behind the desk was not Samuel Beadle, and he had to fumble around to find my bill.

"Here we are. Everything all right?"

"Fine," I answered in a dead voice. "Is Mr. Beadle around?"

"No, I'm afraid he's not back yet. Been out all night looking for his daughter. She's a very popular girl, being the Winter Queen and all that nonsense. Probably find she was at a party somewhere."

A little noise came out of my throat.

I threw my suitcases in the back seat of my car and got behind the wheel. On that morning nothing I could recall seemed real to me. The snow was falling and I watched it through my windshield, slow and silent and entrancing.

I started up my car, routinely glancing in my rear view mirror. What I saw there is now vividly framed in my mind, as it was framed in the back window of my car when I turned to verify its reality.

In the middle of the street behind me, standing ankle-deep in snow, was Thoss and another figure. When I looked closely at the other I recognized him as one of the boys whom I surprised in that diner. But he had now taken on a corrupt and listless resemblance to his new family. Both he and Thoss stared at me, making no attempt to forestall my departure. Thoss knew that this was unnecessary.

I had to carry the image of those two dark figures in my mind as I drove back home. But only now has the full weight of my experience descended upon me. So far I have claimed illness in order to avoid my teaching schedule. To face the normal flow of life as I had formerly known it would be im-

possible. I am now very much under the influence of a season and a climate far colder and more barren than all the winters in human memory. And mentally retracing past events does not seem to have helped; I can feel myself sinking deeper into a velvety white abyss.

At certain times I could almost dissolve entirely into this inner realm of awful purity and emptiness. I remember those invisible moments when in disguise I drifted through the streets of Mirocaw, untouched by the drunken, noisy forms around me: untouchable. But instantly I recoil at this grotesque nostalgia, for I realize what is happening and what I do not want to be true, though Thoss proclaimed it was. I recall his command to those others as I lay helplessly prone in the tunnel. They could have apprehended me, but Thoss, my old master, called them back. His voice echoed throughout that cavern, and it now reverberates within my own psychic chambers of memory.

"He is one of us," it said. "He has always been one of us." It is this voice which now fills my dreams and my days and my long winter nights. I have seen you, Dr. Thoss, through the snow outside my window. Soon I will celebrate, alone, that last feast which will kill your words, only to prove how well I have learned their truth.

To the memory of H. P. Lovecraft

The Shadow At The Bottom Of The World (2011 Grimscribe Version)

First published in *Fear #16*, April 1990

Before there occurred anything of a truly prodigious nature, the season had manifestly erupted with some feverish intent. This, at least, was how it appeared to us, whether we happened to live in town or somewhere outside its limits. (And traveling between town and countryside was Mr. Marble, who had been studying the seasonal signs far longer and in greater depth than we, disclosing prophecies that no one would credit at the time.) On the calendars which hung in so many of our homes, the monthly photograph illustrated the spirit of the numbered days below it: sheaves of cornstalks standing brownish and brittle in a newly harvested field, a narrow house and wide barn in the background, a sky of empty light above, and fiery leafage frolicking about the edges of the scene. But something dark, something abysmal always finds its way into the bland beauty of such pictures, something that usually holds itself in abeyance, some entwining presence that we always know is there. And it was exactly this presence that had gone into crisis, or perhaps had been secretly invoked by small shadowy voices calling out in the midst of our dreams. There came a bitter scent into the air, as of sweet wine turning to vinegar, and there was a hysteric brilliance flourished by the trees in town as

well as those in the woods beyond, while along the roads between were the intemperate displays of thorn apple, sumac, and towering sunflowers that nodded behind crooked roadside fences. Even the stars of chill nights seemed to grow delirious and take on the tints of an earthly inflammation. Finally, there was a moonlit field where a scarecrow had been left to watch over ground that had long been cleared yet would not turn cold.

Adjacent to the edge of town, the field allowed full view of itself from so many of our windows. It lay spacious beyond tilting fence-posts and under a bright round moon, uncluttered save for the peaked silhouettes of corn shocks and a manlike shape that stood fixed in the nocturnal solitude. The head of the figure was slumped forward, as if a grotesque slumber had overtaken its straw-stuffed body, and the arms were slackly extended in a way that suggested some incredible gesture toward flight. For a moment it seemed to be an insistent wind which was flapping those patched-up overalls and fluttering the worn flannel of those shirt sleeves. And it would seem a forceful wind indeed which caused that stitched-up head to nod in its dreams. But nothing else joined in such movements: the withered leaves of the cornstalks were stiff and unstirring, the trees of the distant woods were in a lull against the clear night. Only one thing appeared to be living where the moonlight spread across that dead field. And there were some who claimed that the scarecrow actually raised its arms and its empty face to the sky, as though declaring itself to the heavens, while others thought that its legs kicked wildly, like those of a man who is hanged, and that they kept on kicking for the longest time before the thing collapsed and lay quiet. Many of us, we dis-

covered, had been nudged from our beds that night, called as witnesses to this obscure spectacle. Afterward, the sight we had seen, whatever we believed its reason, would not rest within us but snatched at the edges of our sleep until morning.

And during the overcast hours of the following day we could not keep ourselves from visiting the place around which various rumors had hastily arisen. As pilgrims we wandered into that field, scrutinizing the debris of its harvest for augural signs, circling that scarecrow as if it were a great idol in shabby disguise, a sacred avatar out of season. But everything upon that land seemed unwilling to support our hunger for revelation, and our congregation was lost in fidgeting bemusement. (With the exception, of course, of Mr. Marble, whose eyes, we recall, were gleaming with perceptions he could not offer us in any words we would understand.) The sky had hidden itself behind a leaden vault of clouds, depriving us of the crucial element of pure sunlight which we needed to fully burn off the misty dreams of the past night. A vine-twisted stone wall along the property line of the farm was the same shade as the sky, while the dormant vines themselves were as colorless as the stone they enmeshed like a strange network of dead veins. But this calculated grayness was merely an aspect of the scene, for the colors of the abundant woods along the margins of the landscape were undulled, as if those radiant leaves possessed some inner source of illumination or stood in contrast to some deeper shadow which they served to mask.

Such conditions no doubt impeded our efforts to come to terms with our fears about that particular field. Above all these manifestations, however, was the fact that the earth of

those harvested acres, especially in the area surrounding the scarecrow, was unnaturally warm for the season. It seemed, in fact, that a late harvest was due. And some insisted that the odd droning noises that filled the air could not be blamed on the legions of local cicadas but indeed rose up from under the ground.

By the time of twilight, only a few stragglers remained in the field, among them the old farmer who owned this suddenly notorious acreage. We knew that he shared the same impulse as the rest of us when he stepped up to his scarecrow and began to tear the impostor to pieces. Others joined in the vandalism, pulling out handfuls of straw and stripping away the clothes until they had exposed what lay beneath them—the strange and unexpected sight.

For the skeleton of the thing should have been merely two crosswise planks. We verified this common fact with its maker, and he swore that no other materials had been used. Yet the shape that stood before us was of a wholly different nature. It was something black and twisted into the form of a man, something that seemed to have come up from the earth and grown over the wooden planks like a dark fungus, consuming the structure. There were now black legs that hung as if charred and withered; there was a head that sagged like a sack of ashes upon a meager body of blackness; and there were thin arms stretched like knobby branches from a lightning-scorched tree. All of this was supported by a thick, dark stalk which rose from the earth and reached into the effigy like a hand into a puppet.

And as that sunless day began to dim, our vision was still held by that thing which dangled ominously in the dusk. Its composition appeared to be of the blackest earth, of earth

that had gone stagnant somewhere in its depths, where a rich loam had festered into a bog of shadows. Soon we realized that each of us had fallen silent, entranced by a deep blackness which seemed to absorb our sight but which exposed nothing to scrutiny except an abyss in the outline of a man. Even when we ventured to lay our hands on that mass of darkness, we found only greater mysteries. For there was almost no tangible aspect to it, merely a hint of material sensation, barely the feel of wind or water. It seemed to possess no more substance than a few shifting flames, but flames of only the slightest warmth, black flames that have curled together to take on the molten texture of spoiled fruit. And there was a vague sense of circulation, as though a kind of serpentine life swirled gently within. But no one could stand to keep his hold upon it for long before stepping away.

"Damn the thing, it's not going to be rooted to my land," said the old farmer. Then he walked off toward the barn. And like the rest of us he was trying to rub something from the hand that had touched the shriveled scarecrow, something that could not be seen.

He returned to us with an armory of axes, shovels, and other implements for uprooting what had grown upon his land, this eccentricity of the harvest. It would seem to have been a simple task: the ground was curiously soft all around the base of that black growth and its tenuous substance could hardly resist the wide blade of the farmer's axe. But when the old man swung and tried to split the thing like a piece of firewood, the blade would not cleave. The axe entered and was closed upon, as if sunk within a viscous mire. The farmer pulled at the handle and managed to dislodge the axe, but he immediately let it fall from his hands.

“It was pulling back on me,” he said in a low voice. “And you heard that sound.” Indeed, the sound which had haunted the area all that day—like innumerable insects laughing—did seem to rise in pitch and intensity when the thing was struck.

Without a word, we began digging up the earth where that thick black stalk was buried. We dug fairly deep before the approaching night forced us to abandon our efforts. Yet no matter how far down we burrowed, it was not far enough to reach the bottom of that sprouting blackness. Furthermore, our attempts became hindered by a perverse reluctance, as in the instance of someone who is hesitant to have a diseased part of his own body cut away in order to keep the disease from spreading.

The clouds of that day had lingered to hide the moon, and in the darkness our voices whispered various strategies, so that we might yet accomplish what we had thereto failed in doing. Nor did any of our words now rise above a whisper, although none of us would have said why this was so.

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The great shadow of a moonless night encompassed the landscape, preserving us from seeing the old farmer's field and what was tenanted there. And yet so many of the houses in town were in vigil throughout those dark hours. Soft lights shone through curtained windows along the length of each street, where our trim wooden homes seemed as small as dollhouses beneath the dark rustling depths of the season. Above the gathered roofs hovered the glass globes of streetlamps, like little moons set inside the dense leaves of elms and oaks and maples. Even in the night, the light shining

through those leaves betrayed the festival of colors seething within them, blazing auras which had not faded with the passing days, a plague of colors that had already begun to infect our dreams. This prodigy had by then become connected in our minds with that field just outside of town and the strange growth which there had taken root.

Thus, a sense of urgency led us back to that place, where we found the old farmer waiting for us as the frigid aurora of dawn appeared above the distant woods. Our eyes scanned the frost-powdered earth and studied every space among shadows and corn shocks spread out over the land, searching for what was no longer present in the scene. “It's gone back,” the farmer revealed to us. “Gone into the earth like something hiding in its shell. Don't walk there,” he warned, pointing to the mouth of a wide pit.

We gathered about the edge of this opening in the ground, gazing into its depths. Even full daybreak did not show us the bottom of that dark well. Our speculations were brief and futile. Some of us picked up the shovels lying nearby, as if to begin the long duty of filling in the great aperture. “No use in that,” said the farmer. He then found a large stone and dropped it straight down the shaft. We waited and waited; we put our heads close to the hole and listened. But all we seemed to hear were remote, humming echoes, as of countless voices of insects chattering unseen. Finally, we covered the hazardous pit with some boards and buried the makeshift enclosure under a mound of soft dirt. “Maybe there'll be some change in the spring,” someone said. But the old farmer only chuckled. “You mean when the ground warms up? Why do you think those leaves aren't falling the way they should?”

It was not long after this troubling episode that our dreams, which formerly had been the merest shadows and glimpses, swelled into full phase. Yet they must not have been dreams entirely, but also excavations into the season which had inspired them. In sleep we were consumed by the feverish life of the earth, cast among a ripe, fairly rotting world of strange growth and transformation. We took a place within a darkly flourishing landscape where even the air was ripened into ruddy hues and everything wore the wrinkled grimace of decay, the mottled complexion of old flesh. The face of the land itself was knotted with so many other faces, ones that were corrupted by vile impulses. Grotesque expressions were molding themselves into the darkish grooves of ancient bark and the whorls of withered leaf; pulpy, misshapen features peered out of damp furrows; and the crisp skin of stalks and dead seeds split into a multitude of crooked smiles. All was a freakish mask painted with russet, rashy colors—colors that bled with a virulent intensity, so rich and vibrant that things trembled with their own ripeness.

But despite their gross palpability, there remained something spectral at the heart of our new dreams. It moved in shadow, a presence that was *in* the world of solid forms but not *of* it. Nor did it belong to any other world that could be named, unless it was to that realm which is suggested to us by an autumn night when fields lay ragged in moonlight and some wild spirit has entered into things, a great aberration sprouting forth from a chasm of moist and fertile shadows, a hollow-eyed howling malignity rising to present itself to the cold emptiness of space and the pale gaze of the moon.

And it was to that moon we were forced to look for comfort when we awoke trembling in the night, overcome by the sense that another life was taking root within us, seeking its ultimate incarnation in the bodies we always dreamed were our own and inviting us into the depths of an extraordinary harvest.

Certainly there was some relief when we began to discover, after many insecure hints and delvings, that the dreams were not a sickness restricted to solitary individuals or families but in fact were epidemic throughout the community. No longer were we required to disguise our uneasiness as we met on the streets under the luxuriant shadows of trees that would not cast off their gaudy foliage, the mocking plumage of a strange season. We had become a race of eccentrics and openly declared an array of singular whims and suspicions, at least while daylight allowed this audacity.

Honored among us was that one old fellow, well known for his oddities, who had anticipated our troubles weeks beforehand. As he wandered about town, wheeling the blade-sharpening grindstone by which he earned his living, Mr. Marble had spoken of what he could "read in the leaves," as if those fluttering scraps of lush color were the pages of a secret book in which he perused gold and crimson hieroglyphs. "Just look at them," he urged passersby, "bleeding their colors like that. They should be bled dry, but now they're making pictures. Something inside trying to show itself. They're as dead as rags now, all limp and flapping. But something's still in there. Those pictures, do you see them?"

Yes, we saw them, though somewhat belatedly. And they were not seen only in the chromatic designs of those deathless leaves. They could show themselves anywhere, if always

briefly. Upon a cellar wall there might appear an ill-formed visage among the damp and fractured stones, a hideous impersonation of a face infiltrating the dark corners of our homes. Other faces, leprous masks, would arise within the grain of paneled walls or wooden floors, spying for a moment before sinking back into the knotty shadows, withdrawing below the surface. And there were so many nameless patterns that might spread themselves across the boards of an old fence or the side of a shed, engravings all tangled and wizened like a subterranean craze of roots and tendrils, an underworld riot of branching convolutions, gnarled ornamentations. Yet these designs were not unfamiliar to us... for in them we recognized the same outlines of autumnal decay we saw our dreams.

Like the old visionary who sharpened knives and axes and curving scythes, we too could now read the great book of countless colored leaves. But still he remained far in advance of what was happening deep within us all. For it was he who manifested certain idiosyncrasies of manner that would later appear in so many others, whether they lived in town or somewhere outside its limits. Of course, he had always set himself apart from us by his waywardness of speech, his willingness to utter pronouncements of dire or delightful curiosity. To a child he might say: “The sight of the night can fly like a kite,” while someone older would be told: “Doesn't have arms, but it knows how to use them. Doesn't have a face, but it knows where to find one.”

Nevertheless, he plied his trade with every efficiency, pedaling the mechanism that turned the grindstone, expertly honing each blade and taking his pay like any man of business. Then, we noticed, he seemed to become distracted

in his work. In a dull trance he touched metal implements to his spinning wheel of stone, careless of the sparks that flew into his face. Yet there was also a wild luminousness in his eyes, as of a diamond-bright fever burning within him. Eventually we found ourselves unable to abide his company, though we now attributed this merely to some upsurge in his perennial strangeness rather than to a wholly unprecedented change in his behavior. It was not until he no longer appeared on the streets of town, or anywhere else, that we admitted our fears about him.

And these fears necessarily became linked to the other disruptions of that season, those extravagant omens which were gaining force all around us. The disappearance of Mr. Marble coincided with a new phenomenon, one that finally became apparent in the twilight of a certain day when all of the clustering and tenacious foliage seemed to exude a vague phosphorescence. By nightfall this prodigy was beyond skepticism. The multicolored leaves were softly glowing against the black sky, creating an untimely nocturnal rainbow which scattered its spectral tints everywhere and dyed the night with a harvest of hues: peach gold and pumpkin orange, honey yellow and winy amber, apple red and plum violet. Lustrous within their leafy shapes, the colors cast themselves across the darkness and were splattered upon our streets and our fields and our faces. Everything was resplendent with the pyrotechnics of a new autumn.

That night we kept to our houses and watched at our windows. It was no marvel, then, that so many of us saw the one who wandered about the town on that iridescent eve, and who joined in its outbursts and celebrations. Possessed by the ecstasies of a dark festival, he moved in a trance, bearing

in his hand that great ceremonial knife whose keen edge flashed a thousand glittering dreams. He was seen standing alone beneath trees whose colors shined upon him, staining his face and his tattered clothes. He was seen standing alone in the yards of our houses, a rigid scarecrow concocted from a patchwork of shadows. He was seen stalking beside high wooden fences that were now painted with a quivering glow. Finally, he was seen at a certain intersection of streets at the center of town.

By then, we knew what needed to happen. The slaughtering beast had come for its own. A season was upon us out of all seasons, and an aberration had risen that did not belong to the course of life we had always known. It grew out of the earth in a farmer's field, and beneath it was a bottomless hole that we covered with a mound of dirt, thereby denying a hungering presence what it asked of us. Unsated, it would now take what it desired. As frightened as we were, we also felt resentment and outrage. From the beginning, there was an exchange to which we had resigned ourselves: that which is given must one day be given back. In time the eternal darkness would arrive, as each of our lives was reclaimed at its end and went back to the earth that had borne our bodies and sustained them with its plenty. But the phenomenon we confronted seemed nothing less than a premature craving, a greed surpassing our covenant with earth's estate. What we were forced to stipulate, then, was another, perhaps more fundamental, order of being than our species had suspected, even a betrayal or deception on the part of creation itself. All that was left to us was to wonder: who knows all that is innate to this world, or to any other? Why should there not be

something buried deep within appearances, something that wears a mask to hide itself behind the visibility of nature?

But whatever it was that secreted itself in outward shapes mattered less to us that night than the plan it had conceived for an expertly whetted blade and the possessed hand that held it. We had no illusions that our fate could be evaded or opposed. For if the power or entity that had seized our land could exercise its will as we had seen, what was there that it could not do? And now it was rousing itself to a furor. More than ever, the trees burned with an eerie incandescence, and the chittering noises that commanded the sultry air began rising to a pitch of vicious laughter. As Mr. Marble stood in the center of town, he eyed our houses in turn, the matter of his mind seemingly focused on where the blood would begin and how voracious would be the ravening demanded by whatever mystery empowered him as its brutal servant.

Like any group of persons who feel a sure sense of imminent mayhem, each of us hoped that it might pass us by and the worst would be visited on others. Cowards all, we prayed to be overlooked in the coming massacre. But our shame was not long-lived. Voices began to call from the street to those of us who were still in hiding. “He's gone,” someone said. “We saw him go off into the woods.” He had raised his knife, it was reported, but his hand trembled, as if he was fighting against it. Then he walked off past the town limits. “More like staggered,” said a woman who was holding a spatula like a weapon. “You'd think he was walking in a windstorm that way he leaned forward, pushing and pushing. I was afraid that he'd tumble back into Main Street.” A man who came late to the scene avowed to all of us that if Mr. Marble had stayed any longer, he was going to approach him and say,

“Take me and spare the others. Blood is blood.” It was not difficult to see through his fabrication.

For some hours, we huddled in the center of town, waiting to see if Mr. Marble would return. The trees around us seemed to be fading in their radiance, and the night was quiet, the din of shrill vibrations in the air having abated entirely. A few at a time, we turned back to our houses, which had now lost their reek of moldering shadows, and gradually the town succumbed to a dreamless sleep. Somehow we all felt assured that what we feared would happen that night would not come to pass.

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Yet at daybreak it became evident that something had indeed happened during the night. Everywhere the earth had at last turned cold. And the trees now stood bare of leaves, all of which lay dark and withered upon the ground, as if their strangely deferred dying had finally overtaken them in a sudden rage of mortification. We searched both the town and countryside for any remaining sign of the appalling season we had endured. And it was not long before Mr. Marble was discovered.

The corpse reposed in a field, stretched face-down across a mound of dirt and alongside the remains of a dismantled scarecrow. When we turned over the body we looked upon open eyes as colorless as that ashen autumn morning. Then we marked that the figure's left arm had been slashed to the bone by the knife still gripped in its right hand.

Blood had flowed over the earth and blackened the flesh of the self-murdered man. But those of us who handled that limp, nearly weightless body, dipping our fingers into the

dark wound, found nothing at all that had the feeling of blood. We knew very well, of course, what that shadowy blackness did feel like. We knew what had found its way into the man before us and dragged him into its savage world. His affinity with the immanent schemes of existence had always been much deeper than ours. So we buried him deep in a bottomless grave.

The Shadow At The Bottom Of The World (1991 Grimscribe Version)

First published in *Fear #16*, April 1990

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well as those in the woods beyond, while along the roads between were the intemperate displays of thornapple, sumac, and towering sunflowers that nodded behind crooked roadside fences. Even the stars of chill nights seemed to grow delirious and take on the tints of an earthly inflammation. Finally, there was a moonlit field where a scarecrow had been left to watch over ground that had long been cleared yet would not turn cold.

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covered, had been nudged from our beds that night, called as witnesses to this obscure spectacle. Afterward, the sight we had seen, whatever we believed its reason, would not rest within us but snatched at the edges of our sleep until morning.

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Thus, a sense of urgency led us back to that place, where we found the old farmer waiting for us as the frigid aurora of dawn appeared above the distant woods. Our eyes scanned the frost-powdered earth and studied every space among shadows and corn shocks spread out over the land, searching for what was no longer present in the scene. “It's gone back,” the farmer revealed to us. “Gone into the earth like something hiding in its shell. Don't walk there,” he warned, pointing to the mouth of a wide pit.

We gathered about the edge of this opening in the ground, gazing into its depths. Even full daybreak did not show us the bottom of that dark well. Our speculations were brief and useless. Some of us picked up the shovels lying nearby, as if to begin the long duty of filling in the great aperture. “No use in that,” said the farmer. He then found a large stone and dropped it straight down the shaft. We waited and waited; we put our heads close to the hole and listened. But all we seemed to hear were remote, droning echoes, as of countless voices of insects chattering unseen. Finally, we covered the hazardous pit with some boards and buried the makeshift enclosure under a mound of soft dirt. “Maybe there'll be some change in the spring,” someone said. But the old farmer only chuckled. “You mean when the ground warms up? Why do you think those leaves aren't falling the way they should?”

It was not long after this troubling episode that our dreams, which formerly had been the merest shadows and glimpses, swelled into full phase. Yet they must not have been dreams entirely, but also excavations into the season which had inspired them. In sleep we were consumed by the feverish life of the earth, cast among a ripe, fairly rotting world of strange growth and transformation. We took a place within a darkly flourishing landscape where even the air was ripened into ruddy hues and everything wore the wrinkled grimace of decay, the mottled complexion of old flesh. The face of the land itself was knotted with so many other faces, ones that were corrupted by vile impulses. Grotesque expressions were molding themselves into the darkish grooves of ancient bark and the whorls of withered leaf; pulpy, misshapen features peered out of damp furrows; and the crisp skin of stalks and dead seeds split into a multitude of crooked smiles. All was a freakish mask painted with russet, rashy colors colors that bled with a virulent intensity, so rich and vibrant that things trembled with their own ripeness. But despite this gross palpability, there remained something spectral at the heart of these dreams. It moved in shadow, a presence that was in the world of solid forms but not of it. Nor did it belong to any other world that could be named, unless it was to that realm which is suggested to us by an autumn night when fields lay ragged in moonlight and some wild spirit has entered into things, a great aberration sprouting forth from a chasm of moist and fertile shadows, a hollow-eyed howling malignity rising to present itself to the cold emptiness of space and the pale gaze of the moon.

And it was to that moon we were forced to look for comfort when we awoke trembling in the night, overcome by the

sense that another life was taking root within us, seeking its ultimate incarnation in the bodies we always dreamed were our own and inviting us into the depths of an extraordinary harvest.

Certainly there was some relief when we began to discover, after many insecure hints and delvings, that the dreams were not a sickness restricted to solitary individuals or families but in fact were epidemic throughout the community. No longer were we required to disguise our uneasiness as we met on the streets under the luxuriant shadows of trees that would not cast off their gaudy foliage, the mocking plumage of a strange season. We had become a race of eccentrics and openly declared an array of curious whims and suspicions, at least while daylight allowed this audacity.

Honored among us was that one old fellow, well known for his oddities, who had anticipated our troubles weeks beforehand. As he wandered about town, wheeling the blade-sharpening grindstone by which he earned his living, Mr. Marble had spoken of what he could “read in the leaves”, as if those fluttering scraps of lush color were the pages of a secret book in which he perused gold and crimson hieroglyphs. “Just look at them,” he urged passers-by, “bleeding their colors like that. They should be bled dry, but now they're... making pictures. Something inside trying to show itself. They're as dead as rags now, look at them all limp and flapping. But something's still in there. Those pictures, do you see them?”

Yes, we saw them, though somewhat belatedly. And they were not seen only in the chromatic designs of those deathless leaves. They could show themselves anywhere, if always briefly. Upon a cellar wall there might appear an ill-formed

visage among the damp and fractured stones, a hideous impersonation of a face infiltrating the dark corners of our homes. Other faces, leprous masks, would arise within the grain of panelled walls or wooden floors, spying for a moment before sinking back into the knotty shadows, withdrawing below the surface, And there were so many nameless patterns that might spread themselves across the boards of an old fence or the side of a shed, engravings all tangled and wizened like a subterranean craze of roots and tendrils, an underworld riot of branching convolutions, gnarled ornamentations. Yet these designs were not unfamiliar to us... for in them we recognized the same outlines of autumnal decay that illuminated our dreams. Like the old visionary who sharpened knives and axes and curving scythes, we too could now read the great book of countless colored leaves. But still he remained far in advance of what was happening deep within us all. For it was he who manifested certain idiosyncrasies of manner that would have later appeared in so many others, whether they lived in town or somewhere outside its limits. Of course, he had always set himself apart from us by his waywardness of speech, his willingness to utter pronouncements of dire or delightful curiosity. To a child he might say: “The sight of the night can fly like a kite,” while someone older would be told: “Doesn't have arms, but it knows how to use them. Doesn't have a face, but it knows where to find one.”

Nevertheless, he plied his trade with every efficiency, pedalling the mechanism that turned the grindstone, expertly honing each blade and taking his pay like any man of business. Then, we noticed, he seemed to become distracted in his work. In a dull trance he touched metal implements to

his spinning wheel of stone, careless of the sparks that flew into his face. Yet there was also a wild luminousness in his eyes, as of a diamond-bright fever burning within him. Eventually we found ourselves unable to abide his company, though we now attributed this merely to some upsurge in his perennial strangeness rather than to a wholly unprecedented change in his behavior. It was not until he no longer appeared on the streets of town, or anywhere else, that we admitted our fears about him.

And these fears necessarily became linked to the other disruptions of that season, those extravagant omens which were gaining force all around us. The disappearance of Mr. Marble coincided with a new phenomenon, one that finally became apparent in the twilight of a certain day when all of the clustering and tenacious foliage seemed to exude a vague phosphorescence. By nightfall this prodigy was beyond skepticism. The multicolored leaves were softly glowing against the black sky, creating an untimely nocturnal rainbow which scattered its spectral tints everywhere and dyed the night with a harvest of hues: peach gold and pumpkin orange, honey yellow and winy amber, apple red and plum violet. Luminous within their leafy shapes, the colors cast themselves across the darkness and were splattered upon our streets and our fields and our faces. Everything was resplendent with the pyrotechnics of a new autumn.

That night we kept to our houses and watched at our windows. It was no marvel, then, that so many of us saw the one who wandered that iridescent eve, who joined in its outbursts and celebrations. Possessed by the ecstacies of a dark festival, he moved in a trance, bearing in his hand that great ceremonial knife whose keen edge flashed a thousand glit-

tering dreams, He was seen standing alone beneath trees whose colors shined upon him, staining his face and his tattered clothes. He was seen standing alone in the yards of our houses, a rigid scarecrow concocted from a patchwork of colors and shadows. He was seen stalking slow and rhythmically beside high wooden fences that were now painted with a quivering colored glow. Finally, he was seen at a certain intersection of streets at the center of town; but now, as we saw, he was no longer alone.

Confronting him in the open night were two figures whom none of us knew: a young woman and, held tightly by her side, a small boy. We were not unaccustomed to strangers walking the streets of our town, or even stopping by one of the surrounding farms people who were passing through, some momentarily lost. And it was not too late in the evening for some travellers to appear, not really late at all. But they should not have been there, those two. Not on that night. Now they stood transfixed before a creature of whom they could have no conception, a thing that squeezed the knife in its hand the way the woman was now squeezing the small boy. We might have taken action but did not; we might have made an effort to help them. But the truth is that we wanted something to happen to them—we wanted to see them silenced. Such was our desire. Only then would we be sure that they could not tell what they knew. Our fear was not what those intruders might have learned about the trees that glowed so unnaturally in the night; or about the chittering noises that now began rising to a pitch of vicious laughter; or even about the farmer's field where a mound of dirt covered a bottomless hole. Our fear was what they

might have known, what they must certainly have discovered, about us.

And we lost all hope when we saw the quaking hand that could not raise the knife, the tortured face that could only stare while those two terrible victims—the rightful sacrifice!—ran off to safety, never to be seen by us again. After that we turned back to our houses, which now reeked of moldering shadows, and succumbed to a dreamless sleep.

Yet at daybreak it became evident that something had indeed happened during the night. The air was silent, everywhere the earth was cold. And the trees now stood bare of leaves, all of which lay dark and withered upon the ground, as if their strangely deferred dying had finally overtaken them in a sudden rage of mortification. Nor was it long before Mr. Marble was discovered by an old farmer.

The corpse reposed in a field, stretched face-down across a mound of dirt and alongside the remains of a dismantled scarecrow. When we turned over the body we saw that its staring eyes were as dull as that ashen autumn morning. We also saw that its left arm had been slashed by the knife held in its right hand.

Blood had flowed over the earth and blackened the flesh of the suicide. But those of us who handled that limp, nearly weightless body, dipping our fingers into the dark wound, found nothing at all that had the feeling of blood. We knew very well, of course, what that shadowy blackness did feel like; we knew what had found its way into the man before us, dragging him down into its savage world. His dreams had always reached much deeper than ours. So we buried him deep in a bottomless grave.

Flowers Of The Abyss (2011 Grimscribe Version)

First published in *Nyctalops* #19, April 1991

I must whisper my words in the wind, knowing somehow that they will reach you who sent me here. Let this misadventure, like the first rank scent of autumn, be carried back to you, my good people. For it was you who decided where I would go, you who wished I come here and to him. And I agreed, because the fear that filled your voices and lined your faces was so much greater than your words could explain. I feared your fear of him: the one whose name we did not know, the one who lived far from town in that ruined house which long ago had seen the passing of the family Van Livenn. “What a tragedy,” we all agreed. “And they kept that beautiful garden for so long. But he... he doesn't seem much interested in such things.”

I was chosen to unravel his secrets and find what malice or indifference the new owner harbored toward our town. I should be the one, you said. Was I not the teacher of the town's child-citizens, the one who had knowledge that you had not and who might therefore see deeper into the mystery of our man? That was what you said, in the shadows of our church where we met that night; but what you thought, I could not help but sense, was that *he* has no children of his own, no one, and so many of his hours are spent walking through those same woods in which lives the stranger. It would seem quite natural if I happened to pass the old Van

Livenn house, if I happened to stop and perhaps beg a glass of water for a thirsty walker of the woods. But these simple actions, even then, seemed an extraordinary adventure, though none of us confessed to this feeling. Nothing to fear, you said. And so I was chosen to go alone to that house which had fallen into such disrepair.

You have seen the house and how, approaching it from the road that leads out of town, it sprouts suddenly into view —a pale flower amid the dark summer trees, now a ghostly flower at autumn. At first this is how it appeared to my eyes. (Yes, my eyes, think about them, good people: dream about them.) But as I neared the house, its grayish planks, bowed and buckled and oddly spotted, turned the pallid lily to a pulpy toadstool. Surely the house has played this trick on some of you, and all of you have seen it at one time or another: its roof of rippling shingles shaped like scales from some great fish, sea-green and sparkling in the autumn sun; its two attic gables with paned windows that come to a point like the tip of a tear; its sepulcher-shaped doorway at the top of rotted wooden stairs. And as I stood among the shadows outside that door, I heard hundreds of raindrops running up the steps behind me, as the air went cold and the skies gained shadows of their own. The light rain spotted the empty, ashen plot nearby the house, watering the barren ground where that remarkable garden had blossomed in the time of the Van Livenns. What better excuse for my imposing upon the present owner of this house? Shelter me, stranger, from the icy autumn storm, and from a fragrance damp and decayed.

He responded promptly to my rapping, without suspicious movements of the ragged curtains, and I entered his

dark home. There was no need for explanation; he had already seen me walking ahead of the clouds, though I had not seen him: his lanky limbs like vaguely twisted branches; his lazy expressionless face; the colorless rags which are easier to see as tattered wrappings than as parts of even the poorest wardrobe. But his voice, that is something none of you has ever heard. Although shaken at how gentle and musical it sounded, I was even less prepared for the sense of great distances created by the echo of his hollow words.

"It was just such a day as this when I saw you for the first time walking in the woods," he said, looking out at the rain. "But you did not come near to the house. I wondered if you ever would."

His words put me at ease, for our introduction to each other appeared to have already been made. I removed my coat, which he took and placed on a very small wooden chair beside the front door. Extending a long crooked arm and wide hand toward the interior, he formally welcomed me into his home.

But somehow he himself did not seem at home there. It was as if the Van Livenn family had left all their worldly goods behind them for the use of the next occupant of their house, which would not be peculiar, tragedy considered. Nothing seemed to belong to him, though there was little enough in that house to be possessed by anyone. Apart from the two old chairs in which we sat down and the tiny misshapen table between them, the few other objects I could see appeared to have been brought together only by accident or default, a sign of the last days of the Van Livenns. A huge trunk lying in the corner, its great tarnished lock sprung open and its heavy straps falling loosely to the floor, would

have looked much less sullen buried away in an attic or a cellar. And that miniature chair by the door, with an identical twin fallen on its back near the opposite wall, belonged in a child's room. Standing by the shuttered window, a tall bookcase seemed proper enough, if only those cracked pots, bent boots, and other paraphernalia foreign to bookcases had not been stuffed among its battered volumes. A large bedroom bureau stood against one wall, but that would have seemed misplaced in any room: the hollows of its absent drawers were deeply webbed with disuse. All of these things seemed to me wracked with the history of degeneration and death chronicled in our memory of the Van Livenns. But let that rest for now, lest I forget to tell of the thick, dreamy smell that permeated that room, inspiring the sense that malodorous gardens of misshapen growths were budding in the dust and dirty corners everywhere around me.

The only light in the house was provided by two lamps that burned on either side of a mantle over the fireplace. Behind each of these lamps was an oval mirror in an ornate frame, and the reflected light of their quivering wicks threw our shadows onto the wide bare wall at our backs. And while the two of us were sitting still and silent, I saw those other two fidgeting upon the wall, as if wind-blown or perhaps undergoing some subtle torture.

“I have something for you to drink,” he said. “I know how far it is to walk from the town.”

And I did not have to feign my thirst, good people, for it was such that I wanted to swallow the storm, which I could hear beyond the door and the walls but could only see as a brilliance occasionally flashing behind the curtains or shining needle-bright between the dull slats of the shutters.

In the absence of my host, I directed my eyes to the treasures of his house and made them my own. But there was something I had not yet seen, somehow I felt this. Then again, I was sent to spy and so everything around me appeared suspicious. Can you see now what I failed to see then? Can you see it coming into focus through my eyes? Can you peek into those cobwebbed corners or scan the titles of those tilting books? Yes; but can you now, in the maddest dream of your lives, peer into places that have no corners and bear no names? This is what I tried to do: to see beyond the ghoulish remnants of the Van Livenns; to see beyond the haunted stage upon which I had made my entrance. And so I had to turn corners inside-out with my eyes and to read the third side of a book's page, seeking in futility to gaze at what I could then touch with none of my senses. It remained something shapeless and nameless, dampish and submerged, something swampy and abysmal which opposed the pure cold of the autumn storm outside.

When my host returned, he carried with him a dusty green bottle and a sparkling glass, both of which he set upon that little table between our chairs. I took up the bottle and it felt warm in my hand. Expecting some thickish dark liquid to gush from the bottle's neck, I was surprised to see only the purest liquid flowing into the glass. I drank and for a few moments was removed to a world of frozen light that lived within the cool and limpid water.

In the meantime, the blank-faced man had placed something else upon the table. It was a small music box made of some dark wood which looked as if it had the hardness of a jewel and was florid with strange designs that were at once distinct and impossible to focalize. “I found this while rum-

maging about this place," the stranger said. Then slowly he drew back the cover of the box and sat back in his chair. I held both hands around that cold glass and listened to the still colder music. The crisp little notes that arose from the box were like stars of sound coming out in the twilight shadows and silence of the house. The storm had ended, leaving the world outside muffled by wetness. Within those closed rooms, which might now have been transported to the brink of a chasm or deep inside the earth, the music glimmered like infinitesimal flakes of light in that barren décor of dead days. Neither of us appeared to be breathing, and even the shadows behind our chairs were charmed with enchanted immobility. Everything held for a moment to allow the wandering music from the box to pass on toward some sublimely terrible destination. I tried to follow it—through the yellowish haze of the room and deep into the darkness that pressed against the walls, and then deeper into the darkness between the walls, then through the walls and into the unbordered spaces where those silvery tones ascended and quivered like a swarm of insects. There was still beauty in this vision, however tinged it was with the sinister. Even at that point I felt I could lose myself in the vastness spreading about me, a tenebrous expanse rich with unknown exploits. But then something began stirring, irrupting like a disease, poking its horribly colored head through the cool blackness… and chasing me back to my body.

"So what did you think? It was getting bad toward the end, wasn't it? I closed the box before it got worse. Would you say I was correct in my action?"

"Yes," I said, my voice trembling.

“I could see it on your face. My purpose wasn't to harm you. I just wanted to show you something—to give you a glimpse.”

I drank the rest of the water, then set the glass I was still holding on the table. Settling down a bit, I said, “And what was it that you showed me?”

“The madness of things,” he said. And he pronounced these words calmly, precisely, while staring into my eyes to see how I would react.

Of course, I had to hear more. After all, that was why I was there, was it not? Can you hear me in your dreams, my friends?

“The madness of things,” I reiterated, trying to draw more from him. “I'm afraid I don't understand.”

“Nor do I. But that is all I can say about it. Those are the only words I can use. The only ones that apply. Once I delighted in them. As a young student in philosophy I used to say to myself, ‘I am going to learn the madness of things.’ This was something I felt I needed to know—that I needed to *confront*. If I could face the madness of things, I thought, then I would have nothing more to fear. I could live in the universe without feeling I was coming apart, without feeling I would explode with the madness of things that to my mind formed the very foundation of existence. I wanted to tear off the veil and see things as they are, not to blind myself to them.”

“And did you succeed?” I asked, not caring in the least if I were listening to a lunatic, so fascinated was I by what he had to say. Though I could hardly grasp his words, I knew there was something in them that was not alien to me, and for some moments I was distracted by their implications.

For who among us has not experienced something that could be called *the madness of things*? Even if we do not use those exact words, we must at sometime in our lives have had a sense of their meaning. We must have touched, or been touched, by that derangement which the stranger thought to be the foundation of existence. If nothing else, my good people, we have all known the fate of the Van Livenns. It would not be unusual if we pondered in the solitude of our minds what we call their "tragedy" and wondered at this world of ours.

"Succeeded?" said the stranger, bringing me back to myself. "Oh, yes. Only too well I would say. I succeeded in tearing myself loose from all my fears, and even from the world itself. Now I am a vagabond of the universe, a drifter among spaces where the madness of things has no limits. One day, after years of study and practice, I gave myself over to whatever awaited me. But I cannot say where I go or why I go there. Everything is so much chaos in my existence. Somehow, though, I always come back to this world, as if I were some creature that returns on occasion to its home ground. These places at which I arrive seem to draw me to them, as if they have been prepared, even invaded before me. For there are always things, little items, that are just what I would expect. That music box, for instance. I looked around until I found something of that sort. By its designs I could see it had been t*ouched* by the madness of things, and so could you, I noticed. What havoc it must have caused for those unready for such phenomena. What happened in this house? I can only wonder."

And so the tragedy of the Van Livenns was illuminated. Which of them had come across the music box where it must

have lain hidden for who knows how long? Over time, they must have all become its victims. The condition of the house and its grounds—that was the first sign. And then the shouting we began to hear from inside that made us stay away. What did it all mean? It was almost a year before there were no longer any sounds or any movement behind the shutters of the house. Soon after, the five bodies were found, some of them dead longer than others. None of them whole. All of them savaged beyond what was human. We wanted to think it was a stranger, but could not do so for long. Not after an inspection was conducted, and the conclusion drawn that they had gone after one another over at least a month's time. They said that old man Van Livenn must have been the last of them. His body was a mess of hacked pieces, but he must have done it himself, judging by the axe that was still gripped in his dead hand.

"Excuse me," said the stranger, once again arousing me from a state of distraction. He was now standing by the shuttered window, peering through a row of slats he had pulled open. With a slow movement of his hand, he beckoned me to join him, surreptitiously it seemed. "Look. Can you see them?"

Through the slats of the shuttered window I could see something outside, just where the Van Livenns had once cultivated their much-admired garden in bygone days. But what I saw was like the designs on the music box—intricate yet indistinct.

"They almost look like flowers, don't they? So brightly colored as they shine in the night. And yet when I first came upon them—not in this body, of course—almost everything was dark. But it wasn't dark as a house is sometimes dark or

as the woods are dark because of thick trees keeping out the light. It was dark only because there was *nothing to keep out the darkness*. How do I know this? I know because I could see with more than my eyes—I could see with the darkness itself. With the darkness I saw the darkness. It was immensity without end around me—unbroken expansion, dark horizon meeting dark horizon. And there were also things within the darkness, and I believe within my own form, so that if I reached out to touch them across a universe of darkness, I also reached deep inside of myself, such as I was. Yet all I could feel were those things, the flowers. To touch them was like touching light and colors and a thousand kinds of bristling and growing shapes. In all that darkness which let me see with itself, these things squirmed, a wormy mass that was trying to make itself part of me. I must have brought them here when I came to this place. After I took this shape, they abandoned me and burrowed into that ground over there. They broke through the earth that same night, and I thought they would come after me. But somehow the situation had changed. I think they like being where they are now. You can see yourself how they twist about, almost happily."

After these words he fell silent for a moment. It was a dark night, the skies still blanketed by the clouds that earlier had brought the rain. The lamps upon the mantle shone with a piercing light that cut shadows out of the cloth of blackness around us. Why, good people, was I so astonished that this phantom before me could walk across the room and actually lift one of the lamps, then carry it toward the back hallway of the house? He paused, turned, and gestured for me to follow.

“Now you will see them better for the darkness. That is, if you would see the *true* madness.”

Oh, my friends, please do not despise me for the choice I made this night. Remember it was you who sent me, for I was the one who belonged least to our town.

Quietly we walked from the house, as if we were two children sneaking away for a night in the woods. The lamplight skimmed across the wet grass behind the house and then paused where the yard ended and the woods began, fragrant and wind-blown. The light moved to the left and I moved with it, toward that area where a garden once grew.

“Look at them wriggling in the light,” he said when the first rays fell on a convulsing tangle of shapes, like the radiant entrails of hell. But the shapes quickly disappeared into the darkness and out of view, pulling themselves from the rain-softened soil. “They retreat from this light. And you see how they return to their places when the light is withdrawn.”

They closed in again like parted waters rushing to remerge. But these were corrupt waters whose currents had congealed and diversified into creaturely forms strung with sticky and pumping veins, hung with working mouths.

“Move the light as close as you can to the garden,” I said.

He stepped to the very edge, as I stepped farther still toward that retreating flood of slimy tendrils, those aberrations of the abyss. When I was deep into their mesh, I whispered behind me: “Don't lose the light, or they will cover again the ground I am standing on. I can see them so well. The *true* madness. I have confronted it without fear.”

“No,” said the stranger. “You are not prepared. Come back to the light before the candle blows out.”

But I did not listen to him, or to the wind that rose up. It came down from the trees and swept across the garden, throwing it into darkness.

And the wind now carries my words to you, good people. I cannot be there to guide you, but you know now what must be done, both to this horrible house and to its garden that was brought into this world by one who doomed himself to wander other worlds. Please, one last word to stir your sleep. I remember screaming to the stranger:

> They are drawing me into themselves. My eyes can see everything in the darkness. I am not who I am. Can you hear me? Can you hear my words?

–

"I just had the most terrible dream," whispered one of the many who were awakening in the dark bedrooms of the town.

"It was not a dream. Can you hear the others outside?"

A night-gowned figure rose from the bed and moved as a silhouette to the window. Down in the street was a crowd carrying lights and rapping on doors for those still dreaming to join them. Their lamps and lanterns bobbed in the darkness, and the fires of their torches flickered madly. Clusters of flame shot up into the night.

The people of the town said not a word to one another, but they knew where they were going and what they would do to free their fellow citizen, my own self, from his tragedy. And though their eyes saw nothing but the wild destruction that lay ahead, buried like a forgotten dream within each one of them was a perfect picture of other eyes and of the

unspeakable shapes in which they were now embedded. But do not let your fires burn out while you go about your work. Do not let them take you, too, into their unearthly realm. Come, then, and close my eyes. Murder the beings into which they have been drawn. Then shutter your minds as well as you can to the abyss that is home to the madness of things.

Flowers Of The Abyss (1991 Grimscribe Version)

First published in *Nyctalops* #19, April 1991

I must whisper my words in the wind, knowing somehow that they will reach you who sent me here. Let this misadventure, like the first rank scent of autumn, be carried back to you, my good people. For it was you who decided where I would go, you who wished I come here and to him. And I agreed, because the fear that filled your voices and lined your faces was so much greater than your words could explain. I feared your fear of him: the one whose name we did not know, the one whom we saw but who never spoke, the one who lived far from town in that ruined house which long ago had seen the passing of the family Van Livenn.

I was chosen to unravel his secrets and find what malice or indifference he harbored toward our town. I should be the one, you said. Was I not the teacher of the town's child-citizens, the one who had knowledge that you had not and who might therefore see deeper into the mystery of our man? That was what you said, in the shadows of our church where we met that night; but what you thought, whether you knew it or not, was that he has no children of his own, no one, and so many of his hours are spent walking through those same woods in which lives the stranger. It would seem quite natural if I happened to pass the old Van Livenn house, if I happened to stop and perhaps beg a glass of water for a thirsty walker of the woods. But these simple actions, even

then, seemed an extraordinary adventure, though none of us confessed to this feeling.

Nothing to fear, you said. And so I was chosen to go alone.

You have seen the house and how, approaching it from the road that leads out of town, it sprouts suddenly into view —a pale flower amid the dark summer trees, now a ghostly flower at autumn. At first this is how it appeared to my eyes. (Yes, my eyes, think about them, good people: dream about them.) But as I neared the house, its greyish-white planks, bowed and buckled and oddly spotted, turned the pallid lily to a pulpy toadstool. Surely the house has played this trick on some of you, and all of you have seen it at one time or another: its roof of rippling shingles shaped like scales from some great fish, sea-green and sparkling in the autumn sun; its two attic gables with paned windows that come to a point like the tip of a tear, but do not gleam like tears; its sepulcher-shaped doorway at the top of rotted wooden stairs, where there is barely a place for one to stand. And as I stood among the shadows outside that door, I heard hundreds of raindrops running up the steps behind me, as the air went cold and the skies gained shadows of their own. The light rain spotted the empty, ashen plot nearby the house, watering the barren ground where a garden might have blossomed in the time of the Van Livenns. What better excuse for my imposing upon the present owner of this house? Shelter me, stranger, from the icy autumn storm, and from a fragrance damp and decayed.

He responded promptly to my rapping, without suspicious movements of the ragged curtains, and I entered his dark home. There was no need for explanation; he had

already seen me walking ahead of the clouds. And you, good people, have already seen him, at one time or another: his lanky limbs like vaguely twisted branches; his lazy expressionless face; the colorless rags which are easier to see as tattered wrappings than as parts of even the poorest wardrobe. But his voice, that is something none of you has ever heard. Although shaken at how gentle and musical it sounded, I was even less prepared for the sense of frightening distances created by the echo of his hollow words.

"It was just such a day as this when I saw you the first time out there in the woods," he said, looking out at the rain. "But you did not come near to the house."

He had also seen me on other occasions, and our introduction to each other appeared to have already been made long before. I removed my coat, which he took and placed on a very small wooden chair beside the front door. Extending a long crooked arm and wide hand toward the interior, he welcomed me into his home.

But somehow he himself did not seem at home there, even then. And nothing seemed to belong to him, though there was little enough in that house to be possessed by anyone. Apart from the two old chairs in which we sat down and the tiny misshapen table between them, the few other objects I could see appeared to have been brought together only by accident or default, as if a child had put all the odd, leftover furnishings of her dollhouse into an odd, leftover room. A huge trunk lying in the corner, its great tarnished lock sprung open and its heavy straps falling loosely to the floor, would have looked much less sullen buried away in an attic or a cellar. And that miniature chair by the door, with an identical twin fallen on its back near the opposite wall,

belonged in a child's room, but a child whom one could not imagine as still living, even as a dim memory in the most ancient mind. The tall bookcase by the shuttered window would have seemed in keeping, if only those cracked pots, bent boots, and other paraphernalia foreign to bookcases had not been stuffed among its battered volumes. A large bedroom bureau stood against one wall, but that would have seemed misplaced in any room: the hollows of its absent drawers were deeply webbed with disuse. All of these things seemed to me wracked by their own history of transformation, culminating in the metamorphoses of decay. And there was a thick dreamy smell that permeated the room, inspiring the sense that invisible gardens of pale growths were even then budding in the dust and dirty corners everywhere around me. But not everything was visible, to my eyes.

The only light in the house was provided by two lamps that burned on either side of a charred mantel over the fireplace. Behind each of these lamps was an oval mirror in an ornate frame, and the reflected light of their quivering wicks threw our shadows onto the wide bare wall at our backs. And while the two of us were sitting still and silent, I saw those other two fidgeting upon the wall, as if wind-blown or perhaps undergoing some subtle torture.

“I have something for you to drink,” he said. “I know how far it is to walk from the town.”

And I did not have to feign my thirst, good people, for it was such that I wanted to swallow the storm, which I could hear beyond the door and the walls but could only see as a brilliance occasionally flashing behind the curtains or shining needle-bright between the dull slats of the shutters.

In the absence of my host I directed my eyes to the treasures of his house and made them my own. There was something I had not yet seen, somehow I knew this. But what I was looking for was not yet to be seen, which I did not know. I was sent to spy and so everything around me appeared suspicious. Can you see it, through my eyes? Can you peek into those cobwebbed corners or scan the titles of those tilting books? Yes; but can you now, in the maddest dream of your lives, peer into places that have no corners and bear no names? This is what I tried to do: to see beyond the ghoulish remnants of the good Van Livenns, who were now merely dead; to see beyond this haunted stage of hysterical actors, who in their panics pretend to feel what we, good people, pretend not to feel. And so I had to turn corners inside-out with my eyes and to read the third side of a book's page, seeking in futility to gaze at what I could then touch with none of my senses. It remained something shapeless and nameless, dampish and submerged, something swamplike and abysmal which opposed the pure cold of the autumn storm outside.

When he returned he carried with him a dusty green bottle and a sparkling glass, both of which he set upon that little table between our chairs. I took up the bottle and it felt warm in my hand. Expecting some thickish dark liquid to gush from the bottle's neck, I was surprised to see only the clearest water, and strangely the coolest, pouring into the glass. I drank and for a few moments was removed to a world of frozen light that lived within the cool water.

In the meantime he had placed something else upon the table. It was a small music box, like a miniature treasure chest, made of some dark wood which looked as if it had the

hardness of a jewel. This object, I felt, was very old. Slowly, he drew back the cover of the box and sat back in his chair.

I held both hands around that cold glass and listened to the still colder music. The crisp little notes that arose from the box were like stars of sound coming out in the twilight shadows and silence of the house. The storm had ended, leaving the world outside muffled by wetness. Within those closed rooms, which might now have been transported to the brink of a chasm or deep inside the earth, the music glimmered like infinitesimal flakes of light in that barren decor of dead days. Neither of us appeared to be breathing and even the shadows behind our chairs were charmed with enchanted immobility. Everything held for a moment to allow the wandering music from the box to pass on toward some unspeakably wondrous destination. I tried to follow it through the yellowish haze of the room and deep into the darkness that pressed against the walls, and then deeper into the darkness between the walls, then through the walls and into the unbordered red spaces where those silvery tones ascended and settled as true stars. There I could have stretched out forever and lost myself in the soothing mirrors of infinity. But even then something was stirring, erupting like a disease, poking its horribly colored head through the cool blackness... and chasing me back to my body.

“Were you able to see the garden out in the yard?” he asked. I replied that I had seen nothing except a blank slate of dirt. He nodded slowly and then, good people, he softly began.

“Do I look surprised that you will not admit what you saw? But I'm not. Of course you did, you saw them in the garden. Please don't go on shaking your head, don't hide be-

hind a vacant stare. You are not the only one who has passed this house. Almost everyone from the town has gone by, at one time or another, but no one will talk about it. Every one of you has seen them and carries their image with him. But you are the only one to come and see me about it, whether you think you have or not. It's foolish to be amazed, but I am. Because in itself this can only be a small terror, among the vastness of all terrible things. And if this small thing stops your speech, even within yourself, what would the rest of it do to you?

"No, I have no business talking to you this way. Don't listen to me, forget what I said. Be silent, shhhh. Work in silence and think only in silence and do all things silently. Be courageous and silent. Now go. I am not here, the family who gave this house its name are not here, no one is here. But you are here, and the others, I didn't mean—Don't listen to me! Go now."

He had sprung forward in his chair. After a few moments of silence he again fell into a slouch. I stayed; was I not sent, by you, to learn everything you could not?

"Your eyes," he said, "are practising another kind of silence, a hungry silence, the wrong kind. If that is what you want, it makes no difference to me. You see how I live: shadows and silence, leaving things as I find them because I have no reason to disturb them. But there are things that I have known, even though I never wished to know them and cannot give them a name. Now I will tell you one of them. This is about those things you saw in the garden.

"I did not find them while in this body, that I know. Whenever I fall asleep, or sometimes if I'm sitting very still, I may move on to a different place. And sometimes I return

to where I was and sometimes I do not. I have to smile because that could be all there is to say about me, about my life or lives, I can't be sure. But I could say something about those other places and about the things I have seen there. In one of these places I found the flowers and why should I not call them that, since they now dwell in a garden? Almost everything was dark in the place where I found the flowers. But it wasn't dark as a house is sometimes dark or as the woods are dark because of thick trees keeping out the light. It was dark only because there was nothing to keep out the darkness. How do I know this? I know because I could see with more than my eyes I could see with the darkness itself. With the darkness I saw the darkness. And it was immensity without end around me, and I believe within me. It was unbroken expansion, dark horizon meeting dark horizon. But there were also things within the darkness, within me and outside of me, so that if I reached out to touch them across a universe of darkness, I also reached deep inside of this body. But all I could feel were the flowers themselves: to touch them was like touching light and touching colors and a thousand kinds of bristling and growing shapes. It was a horrible feeling, to touch them. In all that darkness which gave me breath and let me see with itself, these things squirmed and fought against me. I cannot explain why they were there, but it sickened me that anything had to be there and more so because it was these flowers, which were like a great mass of maimed things writhing upon the shore of a beautiful dark sea.

“I don't think I meant to bring any of them back with me. When I found that I had, I quickly buried them. They broke through the earth that same night, and I thought they would

come after me. But I don't think they care about that or about anything. I think they like being where they are now, buried and not buried. You have seen yourself how they twist and dance, almost happily. They are horrible things without reason."

After these words he recoiled, for a moment, into silence.

Now it was dark outside, beyond the curtains and the shutters. The lamps upon the mantel shone with a piercing light that cut shadows out of the cloth of blackness around us. Why, good people, was I so astonished that this phantom before me could walk across the room and actually lift one of the lamps, and then carry it toward the back hallway of the house? He paused, turned, and gestured for me to rise from my chair.

"Now you will see them better, even in the darkness."

I rose and followed.

We walked quietly from the house, as if we were two children sneaking away for a night in the woods. The lamplight skimmed across the wet grass behind the house and then paused where the yard ended and the woods began, fragrant and wind-blown. The light moved to the left and I moved with it, toward that area which I—and you, good people—admit only as a great unsodded grave.

"Look at them twisting in the light," he said when the first rays fell on a convulsing tangle of shapes, like the radiant entrails of hell. But the shapes quickly disappeared into the darkness and out of view, pulling themselves from the rain-softened soil. "They retreat from this light. And you see how they return to their places when the light is withdrawn."

They closed in again like parted waters rushing to remerge. But these were corrupt waters whose currents had congealed and diversified into creaturely forms no less horrible than if the cool air itself were strung with sticky and pumping veins, hung with working mouths.

“I want to be in there,” I said. “Move the light as close as you can to the garden.”

He stepped to the very edge, as I stepped farther still toward that retreating flood of tendriled slime, those aberrations of the abyss. When I was deep into their mesh, I whispered behind me: “Don't lose the light, or they will cover again the ground I am standing on. I can see them perfectly now. How on earth? The spectacle itself. I can see them with the darkness, I can touch their light. I don't need the other, but for heaven's sake don't take it away.”

He did not, good people, for I heard him say, “It was not I” when the light went out. No, it was not you, evil stranger; it was only the wind. It came down from the trees and swept across us who are in the garden. And the wind now carries my words to you, good people. I cannot be there to guide you, but you know now what must be done, to me and to this horrible house. Please, one last word to stir your sleep. I remember screaming to the stranger:

Bring back the light. They are drawing me into themselves. My eyes can see everything in the darkness. Can you hear what they are doing? Can you hear?

“What is it?” whispered one of the many awakening voices in the dark bedrooms of the town.

“I said, ‘Can you hear them outside’?”

A nightgowned figure rose from the bed and moved as a silhouette to the window. Down in the street was a mob car-

rying lights and rapping on doors for those still dreaming to join them. Their lamps and lanterns bobbed in the darkness, and the fires of their torches flickered madly. Clusters of flame shot up into the night.

And though the people of the town said not a word to one another, they knew where they were going and what they would do to free their fellow citizen from the madman who had taken him and from the wickedness they knew would one day come from the ruined house of the Van Livenns. And though their eyes saw nothing but the wild destruction that lay ahead, buried like a forgotten dream within each one of them was a perfect picture of other eyes and of the unspeakable shape in which they now lived, and which now had to be murdered.

In The Shadow Of Another World (2011 Grimscribe Version)

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Many times in my life, and in many different places, I have found myself walking at twilight down streets lined with gently stirring trees and old silent houses. On such lulling occasions things seem firmly anchored, quietly settled and exceedingly present to the natural eye: over distant rooftops the sun abandons the scene and casts its last light upon windows, watered lawns, the edges of leaves. In this drowsy setting both great things and small achieve an intricate union, apparently leaving not the least space for anything else to intrude upon their visible domain. But other realms are always capable of making their presence felt, hovering unseen like strange cities disguised as clouds or hidden like a world of pale specters within a fog. One is besieged by orders of entity that refuse to articulate their exact nature or proper milieu. And soon those well-aligned streets reveal that they are, in fact, situated among bizarre landscapes where simple trees and houses are marvelously obscured, where everything is settled within the depths of a vast, echoing abyss. Even the infinite sky itself, across which the sun spreads its expansive light, is merely a blurry little window with a crack in it—a jagged fracture beyond which

one may see, at twilight, what pervades a vacant street lined with gently stirring trees and old silent houses.

On one particular occasion I followed a tree-lined street past all the houses and continued until it brought me to a single house a short distance from town. As the road before me narrowed into a bristling path, and the path ascended in a swerving course up the side of a hump in the otherwise even landscape, I stood before my day's destination.

Like other houses of its kind (I have seen so many of them outlined against a pale sky at dusk), this one possessed the aspect of a mirage, a chimerical quality that led one to doubt its existence. Despite its dark and angular mass, its peaks and porches and worn wooden steps, there was something improperly tenuous about its substance, as if it had been constructed of illicit materials—dreams and vapor posing as solid matter. And this was not the full extent of its resemblance to a true chimera, for somehow the house projected itself as having acquired its present form through a fabulous overlap of properties. There seemed to be the appearance of petrified flesh in its rough outer surfaces, and it was very simple to imagine an inner framework not of beams and boards, but rather of gigantic bones from great beasts of old. The chimneys and shingles, windows and doorways were thus the embellishments of a later age which had misunderstood the real essence of this ancient monstrosity, transforming it into a motley and ludicrous thing. Little wonder, then, that in shame it would attempt to reject its reality and pass itself off as only a shadow on the horizon, a thing of nightmarish beauty that aroused impossible hopes.

As in the past, I looked to the unseen interior of such a house to be the focus of unknown... celebrations. It was my

conviction that the inner world of these dwellings participated, after their own style, in a kind of ceremonious desolation—that translucent festivals might be glimpsed in the corners of certain rooms and that the faraway sounds of mad carnivals filled certain hallways at all hours of the day and night. I am afraid, however, that a peculiar feature of the house in question prevented full indulgence in my usual anticipations. My reference here is to a turret built into one side of the house and rising to an unusual height beyond its roof, so that it looked out upon the world as a lighthouse, diminishing the aspect of introspection that is vital to such structures. And near the cone-roofed peak of this turret, a row of large windows appeared to have been placed, as a quite recent modification, around its entire circumference. But if the house was truly employing its windows to gaze outward more than within, what it saw was nothing. For all the windows of the three ample stories of the house, as well as those of the turret and that small octagonal aperture in the attic, were shuttered closed.

This was, in fact, the state in which I anticipated finding the house, since I had already exchanged numerous letters with Raymond Spare, the present owner.

“I thought you would arrive much sooner,” Spare said on opening the door. “It's almost nightfall and I was sure you understood that only at certain times…”

“My apologies, but I'm here now. Shall I come in?”

Spare stepped aside and gestured theatrically toward the interior of the house, as if he were presenting one of those dubious spectacles that had earned him a substantial livelihood. It was out of an instinct for mystification that he had adopted the surname of the famed visionary and artist, even

claiming some blood or spiritual kinship with this great eccentric. But tonight I was playing the skeptic, as I had in my correspondence with Spare, so that I might force him to earn my credence. There would have been no other way to gain his invitation to witness the phenomena that, as I understood from sources other than the illusionistic Spare, were well worth my attention. Unexpectedly, my host was mundane in appearance, which made it difficult to keep in mind his reputation for showmanship, his gift for trumped-up histrionics.

"You have left everything as he had it before you?" I asked, referring to the deceased former owner whose name Spare never disclosed to me, though I knew it all the same. But that was of no importance.

"Yes, very much as it was. Excellent housekeeper, all things considered."

Spare's observation was regrettably true: the interior of the house was immaculate to the point of being suspect. The great parlor in which we now sat, as well as those other rooms and hallways that receded into the house, exuded the atmosphere of a plush and well-tended mausoleum where the dead are truly at rest. The furnishings were dense and archaic, yet they betrayed no oppressive awareness of other times, no secret conspiracies with departed spirits, regardless of the unnatural mood of twilight created by fastidiously clamped shutters which admitted none of nature's true twilight from the outside world. The clock that I heard resonantly ticking in a nearby room caused no sinister echoes to sound between dark, polished floors and lofty, uncobwebbed ceilings. Absent was all fear or hope of encountering a malign presence in the cellar or an insane shadow in the attic.

Despite a certain odd effect created by thaumaturgic curios appearing on a shelf, as well as a hermetic chart of the heavens nicely framed and hanging upon a wall, no hint of hauntedness was evoked by either the surfaces or obscurities of this house.

"Quite an innocent ambiance," said Spare, who displayed no special prowess in voicing this thought of mine.

"Astonishingly so. Was that part of his intention?"

Spare laughed. "The truth is that this was his original intention, the genesis of what later occupied his genius. In the beginning…"

"A spiritual wasteland?"

"Exactly," Spare confirmed.

"Sterile but… safe."

"You understand, then. His reputation was for risk not retreat. But the notebooks are very clear on the suffering caused by his fantastic gifts, his incredible sensitivity. He required spiritually antiseptic surroundings, yet was hopelessly tempted by the visionary. Again and again in his notebooks he describes himself as 'overwhelmed' to the point of madness. You can appreciate the irony."

"I can certainly appreciate the horror," I replied.

"Of course, well… tonight we will have the advantage of his unfortunate experience. Before the evening advances much further I want to show you where he worked."

"And the shuttered windows?" I asked.

"'They are very much to the point," he answered.

The workshop of which Spare had spoken was located, as one might have surmised, in the uppermost story of the turret in the westernmost part of the house. This circular room could only be reached by climbing a twisting and tenuous

stairway into the attic, where a second set of stairs led up into the turret. Spare fumbled with the key to the low wooden door, and soon we had gained entrance.

The room was definitely what Spare had implied: a workshop, or at least the remains of one. “It seems that toward the end he had begun to destroy his apparatus, as well as some of his work,” Spare explained as I stepped into the room and saw the debris everywhere. Much of the mess consisted of shattered panes of glass that had been colored and distorted in strange ways. A number of them still existed intact, leaning against the curving wall or lying upon a long work table. A few were set up on wooden easels like paintings in progress, the bizarre transformations of their surfaces left unfinished. These panes of corrupted glass had been cut into a variety of shapes, and each had affixed to it—upon a little card—a scribbled character resembling an oriental ideograph. Similar symbols, although much larger, had been inscribed into the wood of the shutters that covered the windows all around the room.

“A symbology that I cannot pretend to understand,” Spare admitted, “except in its function. Here, see what happens when I
remove these labels with the little figures squiggled on them.”

I watched as Spare went about the room stripping the misshapen glyphs from those chromatically deformed panels of glass. And it was not long before I noticed a change in the general character of the room, a shift in atmospherics as when a clear day is suddenly complicated by the shadowy nuances of clouds. Previously the circular chamber had been bathed in a twisted kaleidoscope of colors as the simple

lights around the room diffused through the strangely tinted windowpanes. But the effect had been purely decorative, an experience restricted to the realm of aesthetics, with no implications of the spectral. Now, however, a new element permeated the room, partially and briefly exposing qualities of quite a different order in which the visible gave way to the transcendental. What formerly had appeared as an artist's studio, however eccentric, was gradually inheriting the aura of a stained-glass cathedral, albeit one that had suffered some obscure desecration. In certain places upon the floor, the ceiling, and the circular wall with the shuttered windows, I perceived through those prismatic lenses vague forms which seemed to be struggling toward visibility, freakish outlines laboring to gain full embodiment. Whether their nature was that of the dead or the demonic—or possibly some peculiar progeny generated by their union—I could not tell. But whatever class of creation they seemed to occupy at the time, it was certain that they were gaining not only in clarity and substance, but also in size, swelling and surging and expanding their universe toward an eclipse of this world's vision.

"Is it possible," I said, turning to Spare, "that this effect of magnification is solely a property of the medium through which..."

But before I could complete my speculation, Spare was rushing about the room, frantically replacing the symbols on each sheet of glass, dissolving the images into a quivering translucence and then obliterating or masking them altogether. The room lapsed once again into its former state of iridescent sterility. Then Spare hastily ushered me back to

the ground floor, the door to the turret room standing locked behind us.

Afterward he served as my guide through the other, less crucial rooms of the house, each of which was sealed by dark shutters and all of which shared in the same barren atmosphere—the aftermath of a strange exorcism, a purging of the grounds which left them neither hallowed nor unholy, but had simply turned them into a pristine laboratory where a fearful genius had practiced his science of nightmares.

We passed several hours in the small, lamplit library. The sole window of that room was curtained, and I imagined that I saw the night's darkness behind the pattern. But when I put my hand upon that symmetrical and velvety design, I felt only solidity on the other side, as if I had touched a coffin beneath its pall. It was this barrier that made the world outside seem twice darkened, although I knew that when the shutters were opened I would be faced with one of the clearest nights ever seen.

For some time Spare read to me passages from the notebooks whose cryptography he had broken. I sat and listened to a voice that was accustomed to speaking of miracles, a well-practiced tout of mystical freakshows. Yet I also detected a grave sincerity in his words, which is to say that his usual unruffled patter contained dissonant overtones of fear.

“We sleep,” he read, “among the shadows of another world. These are the unshapely substance inflicted upon us and the prime material to which we give the shapes of our understanding. And though we create what is seen, yet we are not the creators of its essence. Thus nightmares are born from the impress of ourselves on the life of things unknown. How terrible these forms of specter and demon when the

eyes of the flesh cast light and mold the shadows which are forever around us. How much more terrible to witness their true forms roaming free upon the land, or in the most homely rooms of our houses, or frolicking through that luminous hell which in pursuit of psychic survival we have named the heavens. Then we truly waken from our sleep, but only to sleep once more and shun the nightmares which must ever return to that part of us which is hopelessly dreaming."

After witnessing some of the phenomena which had inspired this hypothesis, I could not escape becoming somewhat entranced with its elegance, if not with its originality. Nightmares both within and around us had been integrated into a system that seemed to warrant admiration. However, the scheme was ultimately no more than terror recollected in tranquility, a formula reflecting little of the mazy trauma that had initiated these speculations. Should it be called revelation or delirium when the mind interposes itself between the sensations of the soul and a monstrous mystery? Truth was not an issue in this matter, nor were the mechanics of the experiment (which, even if faulty, yielded worthy results), and in my mind it was faithfulness to the mystery and its terror that was paramount, even sacred. In this the theoretician of nightmares had failed, fallen on the lucid blade of theories that, in the end, could not save him. On the other hand, those wonderful symbols that Spare was at a loss to illuminate, those crude and cryptic designs, represented a genuine power against the mystery's madness, yet could not be explained by the most esoteric analysis. As the erstwhile owner of the house knew, we truly live in the shadow of another world, one which he designed his residence either to

shut out or reveal as he chose, but which in the end overtook him before he had a chance to shutter for good those windows that disclosed the deranged and terrible quiddity of existence.

“I have a question,” I said to Spare when he had closed the volume he held on his lap. “The shutters elsewhere in the house are not painted with the signs that are on those in the turret. Can you enlighten me?”

Spare led me to the window and drew back the curtains. Very cautiously he pulled out one of the shutters just far enough to expose its edge, which revealed that something of a contrasting color and texture composed a layer between the two sides of the dark wood.

“Engraved upon a panel of glass placed inside each shutter,”
he explained.

“And the ones in the turret?” I asked.

“The same. Whether the extra set of symbols there are precautionary or merely redundant…”

His voice had faded and then stopped, though the pause did not seem to imply any thoughtfulness on Spare's part.

“Yes,” I prompted, “precautionary or redundant.”

For a moment he revived. “That is, whether the symbols were an added measure against…”

It was at this point that Spare mentally abandoned the scene, following within his own mind some controversy or suspicion, a witness to a dramatic conflict being enacted upon a remote and shadowy stage.

“Spare,” I said in a somewhat normal voice.

“Spare,” he repeated, but in a voice that was not his own, a voice that sounded more like the echo of a voice than nat-

ural speech. And for a moment I asserted my pose of skepticism, placing none of my confidence in Spare or in the things he had thus far shown me, for I knew that he was an adept of pasteboard visions, a medium whose hauntings were of mucilage and gauze. But how much more subtle and skillful were the present effects, as though he were manipulating the very atmosphere around us, pulling the strings of light and shadow.

"The clearest light is now shining," he said in that hollow, tremulous voice. "Now light is flowing in the glass," he spoke, placing his hand upon the shutter before him. "Shadows gathering against... against..."

And it seemed that Spare was not so much pulling the shutter away from the window as trying to push the shutter closed while it slowly opened further and further, allowing a strange radiance to leak gradually into the house. It also appeared that he finally gave up the struggle and let another force guide his actions. "Flowing together in me," he repeated several times as he went from window to window, methodically opening the shutters like a sleepwalker performing some obscure ritual.

Ransoming all judgment to fascination, I watched him pass through each room on the main floor of the house, executing his duties like an old servant. Then he ascended a long staircase, and I heard his footsteps traversing the floor above, evenly pacing from one side of the house to the other. He was now a night watchman making his rounds in accordance with a strange design. The sound of his movements grew fainter as he progressed to the next floor and continued to perform the services required of him. I listened very closely as he proceeded on his somnambulistic course into

the attic. And when I heard the echoes of a distant door as it slammed shut, I knew he had gone into that room in the turret.

Engrossed in the lesser phenomenon of Spare's suddenly altered behavior, I had momentarily overlooked the greater one of the windows. But now I could no longer ignore those phosphorescent panes which focused or reflected the incredible brilliance of the sky that night. As I followed Spare's circuit about the main floor, I saw that each room was glowing with the superlunary light that was outlined by each window frame. In the library I paused and approached one of the windows, reaching out to touch its wrinkled surface. And I felt a lively rippling in the glass, as if there actually were some force flowing within it, an uncanny sensation that my tingling fingertips will never be able to forget. But it was the scene beyond the glass that finally possessed my attention.

For a few moments I looked out only upon the level landscape that surrounded the house, its open expanse lying desolate and pale beneath the resplendent heavens. Then, almost inconspicuously, different scenes or fragments of scenes began to intrude upon the outside vicinity, as if other geographies of the earth were being superimposed upon the local one, composing a patchwork of images that might seem to have been the hallucinated tableaux of some cosmic tapestry.

The windows—which, for lack of a more accurate term, I must call *enchanted*—had done their work. For the visions they offered were indeed those of a haunted world, a multifaceted mural portraying the marriage of insanity and metaphysics. As the images clarified, I witnessed all the intersec-

tions which commonly remain unseen to earthly sight, the conjoining of planes of entity which should exclude each other and should no more be mingled than is flesh with the inanimate objects that surround it. But this is precisely what took place in the scenes before me, and it appeared that there existed no place on earth that was not the home of a spectral ontogeny. In brief, the whole of the world was a pageant of nightmares.

Sunlit bazaars in exotic cities thronged with faces that were transparent masks for insectoid countenances; moonlit streets in antique towns harbored a strange-eyed slithering within their very stones; dim galleries of empty museums sprouted a ghostly mold that mirrored the sullen hues of old paintings; the land at the edge of oceans gave birth to a new evolution transcending biology and remote islands offered themselves as a haven for forms having no analogy outside of dreams; jungles teemed with beast-like shapes that moved beside the sticky luxuriance as well as through the depths of its pulpy warmth; deserts were alive with an uncanny flux of sounds which might enter and animate the world of substance; and subterranean landscapes heaved with cadaverous generations that had sunken and merged into sculptures of human coral, bodies heaped and unwhole, limbs projecting without order, eyes scattered and searching the darkness.

My own eyes suddenly closed, shutting out the visions for a moment. And during that moment I once again became aware of the sterile quality of the house, of its “innocent ambiance.” It was then that I realized that this house was possibly the only place on earth, perhaps in the entire universe, that had been cured of the plague of phantoms that raged

everywhere. This achievement, however futile or perverse, now elicited from me tremendous admiration as a monument to Terror and the stricken ingenuity it may inspire.

And my admiration intensified as I pursued the way that Spare had laid out for me and ascended a back staircase to the second floor. For on this level, where room followed upon room through a maze of interconnecting doors which Spare had left open, there seemed to be an escalation in the optical power of the windows, thus heightening the threat to the house and its inhabitants. What had appeared, through the windows of the floor below, as scenes in which spectral monstrosities had merely intruded upon orthodox reality, were now magnified to the point where that reality underwent a further eclipse: the other realm became dominant and pushed through the cover of masks, the concealment of stones, spread its moldy growths at will, generating apparitions of the most feverish properties and intentions, erecting formations that enshadowed all familiar order.

By the time I reached the third floor, I was somewhat prepared for what I might find, granted the elevating intensity of the visions to which the windows were giving increasingly greater force and focus. Each window was now a framed phantasmagoria of churning and forever changing shapes and colors, fabulous depths and distances opening to the fascinated eye, grotesque transfigurations that suggested a purely supernatural order, a systemless cosmogony reeling with all the caprice of the immaterial. And as I wandered through those empty and weirdly lucent rooms at the top of house, it seemed that the house itself had been transported to another universe.

I have no idea how long I had been enthralled by the chaotic fantasies imposing themselves upon the unprotected rooms of my mind. But this trance was eventually interrupted by a commotion emanating from an even higher room—the very crown of the turret and, as it were, the cranial chamber of that many-eyed beast of a house. Making my way up the narrow, spiraling stairs to the attic, I found that there, too, Spare had unsealed the octagonal window, which now seemed the gazing eye of some god as it cast forth a pyrotechnic craze of colors and gave a frenzied life to shadows. Through this maze of illusions I followed the voice which was merely a vibrating echo of vocal utterance, the counterpart in sound to the swirling sights around me. I climbed the last stairway to the door leading into the turret, listening to the reverberant words that sounded from the other side.

"Now the shadows are moving in the stars as they are moving within me, within all things. And their brilliance must reach throughout all things, all the places which are created according to the essence of these shadows and of ourselves... *This house is an abomination, a vacuum and a void. Nothing must stand against... against...*"

And with each repetition of this last word it seemed that a struggle was taking place and that the echoing alien voice was fading as the tone of Spare's natural voice was gaining dominance. Finally, Spare appeared to have resumed full possession of himself. Then there was a pause, a brief interim during which I considered a number of doubtful strategies, anxious not to misuse this moment of unknown and extravagant possibilities. Was it merely the end of life that faced one who remained in that room? Could the exper-

ience that had preceded the disappearance of that other visionary, under identical circumstances, perhaps be worth the strange price one would be asked to pay? No occult theories, no arcane analyses, could be of any use in making my decision, nor justly serve the sensations of those few seconds, when I stood gripping the handle of that door, waiting for the impulse or accident that would decide everything. All that existed for the moment was the irreducible certainty of nightmare.

From the other side of the door there now came a low, echoing laughter, a sound which became louder as the laughing one approached. But I was not moved by this sound and did nothing except grip the door handle more tightly, dreaming of the great shadows in the stars, of the strange visions beyond the windows, and of an infinite catastrophe. Then I heard a soft scraping noise at my feet; looking down, I saw several small rectangles projecting from under the door, fanned out like a hand of cards. My only action was to stoop and retrieve one of them, to stare in mindless wonderment at the mysterious symbol which decorated its face. I counted the others, realizing that none had been left attached to the windows within the room in the turret.

It was the thought of what effect these windows might have, now that they had been stripped of their protective signs and stood in the full glare of starlight, that made me call out to Spare, even though I could not be sure that he still existed as his former self. But by then the hollow laughter had stopped, and I am sure that the last voice I heard was that of Raymond Spare. And when the voice began screaming—*the windows*, it said, *pulling me into the stars and shadows*—I could not help trying to enter the room. But now that the

impetus for this action had arrived, it proved to be useless for both Spare and myself. For the door was securely locked, and Spare's voice was fading into nothingness.

I can only imagine what those last few moments were like among all the windows of that turret room and among orders of existence beyond all definition. That night, it was to Spare alone that such secrets were confided; he was the one to whom it fell—by some disaster or design—to be among the elect. Such privileged arcana, on this occasion at least, were not to be mine. Nevertheless, it seemed at the time that some fragment of this experience might be salvaged. And to do this, I believed, was a simple matter of abandoning the house.

My intuition was correct. For as soon as I had gone out into the night and turned back to face the house, I could see that its rooms were no longer empty, no longer the pristine apartments I had lamented earlier that evening. As I had thought, these windows were for looking *in* as well as out. And from where I stood, the sights were now all inside the house, which had become an edifice possessed by the festivities of another world. I remained there until morning, when a cold sunlight settled the motley phantasms of the night before.

Years later I had the opportunity to revisit the house. In conformity with my intuition, I found the place bare and abandoned: every one of its window frames was empty and there was not a sign of glass anywhere. In the nearby town I discovered that the house had also acquired a bad reputation. For years no one had gone near it. Wisely avoiding the enchantments of hell, the citizens of the town have kept to their own little streets of gently stirring trees and old silent

houses. And what more can they do in the way of caution? How can they know what it is their houses are truly nestled among? They cannot see, nor even wish to see, that world of shadows with which they consort every moment of their brief and innocent lives. But often, perhaps during the visionary time of twilight, I am sure they have sensed it.

In The Shadow Of Another World (1991 Grimscribe Version)

First published in *Grimscribe*, 1991

Many times in my life, and in many different places, I have found myself walking at twilight down streets lined with gently stirring trees and old silent houses. On such lulling occasions things seem firmly situated, quietly settled and exceedingly present to the natural eye: over distant rooftops the sun abandons the scene and casts its last light upon windows, watered lawns, the edges of leaves. In this drowsy setting both great things and small achieve an intricate union, apparently leaving not the least space for anything else to intrude upon their visible domain. But other realms are always capable of making their presence felt, hovering unseen like strange cities disguised as clouds or hidden like a world of pale specters within a fog. One is besieged by orders of entity that refuse to articulate their exact nature or proper milieu. And soon those well-aligned streets reveal that they are, in fact, situated among bizarre landscapes where simple trees and houses are marvelously obscured, where everything is settled within the depths of a vast, echoing abyss. Even the infinite sky itself, across which the sun spreads its expansive light, is merely a blurry little window with a crack in it—a jagged fracture beyond which one may

see, at twilight, what occupies and envelops a vacant street lined with gently stirring trees and old silent houses.

On one particular occasion I followed a tree-lined street past all the houses and continued until it brought me to a single house a short distance from town. As the road before me narrowed into a bristling path, and the path ascended in a swerving course up the side of a hump in the otherwise even landscape, I stood before my day's destination.

Like other houses of its kind (I have seen so many of them outlined against a pale sky at dusk), this one possessed the aspect of a mirage, a chimerical quality that led one to doubt its existence. Despite its dark and angular mass, its peaks and porches and worn wooden steps, there was something improperly tenuous about its substance, as if it had been constructed of illicit materials dreams and vapor posing as solid matter. And this was not the full extent of its resemblance to a true chimera, for the house seemed to have acquired its present form through a fabulous conglomeration of properties: conceivably, it had not been forever limited to a single nature and function. Might it not have been a survival of the world's prehistory, a great beast unearthed by time and the elements? There seemed to be the appearance of petrified flesh in its rough outer surfaces, and it was very simple to imagine an inner framework not of beams and boards, but rather of gigantic bones. The chimneys and shingles, windows and doorways were thus the embellishments of a later age which had misunderstood the real essence of this ancient monstrosity, transforming it into a motley and ludicrous thing. Little wonder, then, that in shame it would attempt to reject its reality and pass itself as

only a shadow on the horizon, a thing of nightmarish beauty that aroused impossible hopes.

As in the past, I looked to the unseen interior of the house to be the focus of unknown... celebrations. It was my wishful conviction that the inner world of the house participated, after its own style, in a kind of ceremonious desolation—that translucent festivals might be glimpsed in the comers of certain rooms and that the faraway sounds of mad carnivals filled certain hallways at all hours of the day and night. I am afraid, however, that a peculiar feature of the house prevented full indulgence in the usual anticipations. This feature was a turret built into one side of the house and rising to an unusual height beyond its roof, so that it looked out upon the world as a lighthouse, diminishing the aspect of introspection that is vital to such structures. And near the cone-roofed peak of this turret, a row of large windows appeared to have been placed, as a later modification, around its entire circumference.

But if the house was truly employing its windows to gaze outward more than within, what it saw was nothing. For all the windows of the three ample stories of the house, as well as those of the turret and that small octagonal aperture in the attic, were shuttered closed. This was, in fact, the state in which I expected to find the house, since I had already exchanged numerous letters with Raymond Spare, the present owner.

“I was expecting you much sooner,” Spare said on opening the door. “It's almost nightfall and I was sure you understood that only at certain times...”

“My apologies, but I'm here now. Shall I come in?” Spare stepped aside and gestured theatrically toward the interior

of the house, as if he were presenting one of those dubious spectacles that had earned him a substantial livelihood. It was out of an instinct for mystification that he had adopted the surname of the famed visionary and artist, even claiming some blood or spiritual kinship with this great eccentric. But tonight I was playing the skeptic, as I had in my correspondence with Spare, so that I might force him to earn my credence. There would have been no other way to gain his invitation to witness the phenomena that, as I understood from sources other than the illusionistic Spare, were well worth my attention. And he was so deceptively mundane in appearance, which made it difficult to keep in mind his reputation for showmanship, his gift for fantasmic histrionics.

"You have left everything as he had it before you?" I asked, referring to the deceased former owner whose name Spare never disclosed to me, though I knew it all the same. But that was of no importance.

"Yes, very much as it was. Excellent housekeeper, all things considered."

Spare's observation was regrettably true: the interior of the house was immaculate to the point of being suspect. The great parlor in which we now sat, as well as those other rooms and hallways that receded into the house, exuded the atmosphere of a plush and well-tended mausoleum where the dead are truly at rest. The furnishings were dense and archaic, yet they betrayed no oppressive awareness of other times, no secret conspiracies with departed spirits, regardless of the unnatural mood of twilight created by fastidiously clamped shutters which admitted none of nature's true twilight from the outside world. The clock that I heard reson-

antly ticking in a nearby room caused no sinister echoes to sound between dark, polished floors and lofty, uncobwebbed ceilings. Absent was all fear or hope of encountering a malign presence in the cellar or an insane shadow in the attic. Despite a certain odd effect created by thaumaturgic curios appearing on a shelf, as well as a hermetic chart of the heavens nicely framed and hanging upon a wall, no hint of hauntedness was evoked by either the surfaces or obscurities of this house.

"Quite an innocent ambiance," said Spare, who displayed no special prowess in voicing this thought of mine.

"Unexpectedly so. Was that part of his intention?"

Spare laughed. "The truth is that this was his original intention, the genesis of what later occupied his genius. In the beginning…"

"A spiritual wasteland?"

"Exactly," Spare confirmed. "Sterile but… safe."

"You understand, then. His reputation was for risk not retreat. But the notebooks are very clear on the suffering caused by his fantastic gifts, his incredible sensitivity. He required spiritually antiseptic surroundings, yet was hopelessly tempted by the visionary. Again and again in his notebooks he describes himself as 'overwhelmed' to the point of madness. You can appreciate the irony."

"I can certainly appreciate the horror," I replied.

"Of course, well… tonight we will have the advantage of his unfortunate experience. Before the evening advances much further I want to show you where he worked."

"And the shuttered windows?" I asked.

"They are very much to the point," he answered.

The workshop of which Spare had spoken was located, as one might have surmised, in the uppermost story of the turret in the westernmost part of the house. This circular room could only be reached by climbing a twisting and tenuous stairway into the attic, where a second set of stairs led up into the turret. Spare fumbled with the key to the low wooden door, and soon we had gained entrance.

The room was definitely what Spare had implied: a workshop, or at least the remains of one. "It seems that toward the end he had begun to destroy his apparatus, as well as some of his work," Spare explained as I stepped into the room and saw the debris everywhere. Much of the mess consisted of shattered panes of glass that had been colored and distorted in strange ways. A number of them still existed intact, leaning against the curving wall or lying upon a long work table. A few were set up on wooden easels like paintings in progress, the bizarre transformations of their surfaces left unfinished. These panes of corrupted glass had been cut into a variety of shapes, and each had affixed to it-upon a little card-a scribbled character resembling an oriental ideograph. Similar symbols, although much larger, had been inscribed into the wood of the shutters that covered the windows all around the room.

"A symbology that I cannot pretend to understand," Spare admitted, "except in its function. Here, see what happens when I remove these labels with the little figures squiggled on them."

I watched as Spare went about the room stripping the misshapen glyphs from those chromatically deformed panels of glass. And it was not long before I noticed a change in the general character of the room, a shift in atmospherics as

when a clear day is suddenly complicated by the shadowy nuances of clouds. Previously the circular room had been bathed in a twisted kaleidoscope of colors as the simple lights around the room diffused through the strangely tinted windowpanes; but the effect had been purely decorative, an experience restricted to the realm of aesthetics, with no implications of the spectral. Now, however, a new element permeated the round chamber, partially and briefly exposing qualities of quite a different order in which the visible gave way to the truly visionary. What formerly had appeared as an artist's studio, however eccentric, was gradually inheriting the transcendent aura of a stained-glass cathedral, albeit one that had suffered some obscure desecration. In certain places upon the floor, the ceiling, and the circular wall broken by the shuttered windows, in select regions of the room which I perceived through those prismatic lenses, vague forms seemed to be struggling toward visibility, freakish outlines laboring to gain full embodiment. Whether their nature was that of the dead or the demonic—or possibly some peculiar progeny generated by their union—I could not tell. But whatever class of creation they seemed to occupy at the time, it was certain that they were gaining not only in clarity and substance, but also in size, swelling and surging and expanding their universe toward an eclipse of this world's vision.

“Is it possible,” I said, turning to Spare, “that this effect of magnification is solely a property of the medium through which…”

But before I could complete my speculation, Spare was rushing about the room, frantically replacing the symbols on each sheet of glass, dissolving the images into a quivering

translucence and then obliterating or masking them altogether. The room lapsed once again into its former state of iridescent sterility. Then Spare hastily ushered me back to the ground floor, the door to the turret room standing locked behind us.

Afterward he served as my guide through the other, less crucial rooms of the house, each of which was sealed by dark shutters and all of which shared in the same barren atmosphere the aftermath of a strange exorcism, a purging of the grounds which left them neither hallowed nor unholy, but had simply turned them into a pristine laboratory where a fearful genius had practiced his science of nightmares.

We passed several hours in the small, lamplit library. The sole window of that room was curtained, and I imagined that I saw the night's darkness behind the pattern. But when I put my hand upon that symmetrical and velvety design, I felt only a hardness on the other side, as if I had touched a coffin beneath its pall. It was this barrier that made the world outside seem twice darkened, although I knew that when the shutters were opened I would be faced with one of the clearest nights ever seen.

For some time Spare read to me passages from the notebooks whose simple cryptography he had broken. I sat and listened to a voice that was accustomed to speaking of miracles, a well-practiced tout of mystical freakshows. Yet I also detected a certain conviction in his words, which is to say that his delivery was flawed by dissonant overtones of fear.

“We sleep,” he read, “among the shadows of another world. These are the unshapely substance inflicted upon us and the prime material to which we give the shapes of our understanding. And though we create what is seen, yet we

are not the creators of its essence. Thus nightmares are born from the impress of ourselves on the life of things unknown. How terrible these forms of specter and demon when the eyes of the flesh cast light and mold the shadows which are forever around us. How much more terrible to witness their true forms roaming free upon the land, or in the most homely rooms of our houses, or frolicking through that luminous hell which in madness we have named the heavens. Then we truly waken from our sleep, but only to sleep once more and shun the nightmares which must ever return to that part of us which is hopelessly dreaming."

After witnessing some of the phenomena which had inspired this hypothesis, I could not escape becoming somewhat entranced with its elegance, if not with its originality. Nightmares both within and around us had been integrated into a system that seemed to warrant admiration. However, the scheme was ultimately no more than terror recollected in tranquility, a formula reflecting little of the mazy trauma that had initiated these speculations. Should it be called revelation or delirium when the mind interposes itself between the sensations of the soul and a monstrous mystery? Truth was not an issue in this matter, nor were the mechanics of the experiment (which, even if faulty, yielded worthy results), and in my mind it was faithfulness to the mystery and its terror that was paramount, even sacred. In this the theoretician of nightmares had failed, fallen on the lucid blade of theories that, in the end, could not save him. On the other hand, those wonderful symbols that Spare was at a loss to illuminate, those crude and cryptic designs, represented a genuine power against the mystery's madness, yet could not be explained by the most esoteric analysis.

“I have a question,” I said to Spare when he had closed the volume he held on his lap. “The shutters elsewhere in the house are not painted with the signs that are on those in the turret. Can you enlighten me?”

Spare led me to the window and drew back the curtains. Very cautiously he pulled out one of the shutters just far enough to expose its edge, which revealed that something of a contrasting color and texture composed a layer between the two sides of the dark wood.

“Engraved upon a panel of glass placed inside each shutter,” he explained.

“And the ones in the turret?” I asked.

“The same. Whether the extra set of symbols there are precautionary or merely redundant…”

His voice had faded and then stopped, though the pause did not seem to imply any thoughtfulness on Spare's part.

“Yes,” I prompted, “precautionary or redundant.”

For a moment he revived. “… that is, whether the symbols were an added measure against…”

It was at this point that Spare mentally abandoned the scene, following within his own mind some controversy or suspicion, a witness to a dramatic conflict being enacted upon a remote and shadowy stage.

“Spare,” I said in a somewhat normal voice.

“Spare,” he repeated, but in a voice that was not his own, a voice that sounded more like the echo of a voice than natural speech. And for a moment I asserted my pose of skepticism, placing none of my confidence in Spare or in the things he had thus far shown me, for I knew that he was an adept of pasteboard visions, a medium whose hauntings were of mucilage and gauze. But how much more subtle and

skilful were the present effects, as though he were manipulating the very atmosphere around us, pulling the strings of light and shadow.

"The clearest light is now shining," he said in that hollow, tremulous voice. "Now light is flowing in the glass," he spoke, placing his hand upon the shutter before him. "Shadows gathering against... against..."

And it seemed that Spare was not so much pulling the shutter away from the window as trying to push the shutter closed while it slowly opened further and further, allowing a strange radiance to leak gradually into the house. It also appeared that he finally gave up the struggle and let another force guide his actions. "Flowing together in me," he repeated several times as he went from window to window, methodically opening the shutters like a sleepwalker performing some obscure ritual.

Ransoming all judgment to fascination, I watched him pass through each room on the main floor of the house, executing his duties like an old servant. Then he ascended a long staircase, and I heard his footsteps traversing the floor above, evenly pacing from one side of the house to the other. He was now a nightwatchman making his rounds in accordance with a strange design. The sound of his movements grew fainter as he progressed to the next floor and continued to perform the services required of him. I listened very closely as he proceeded on his somnambulistic course into the attic. And when I heard the echoes of a distant door as it slammed shut, I knew he had gone into that room in the turret.

Engrossed in the lesser phenomenon of Spare's suddenly altered behavior, I had momentarily overlooked the greater

one of the windows. But now I could no longer ignore those phosphorescent panes which focused or reflected the incredible brilliance of the sky that night. As I reiterated Spare's circuit about the main floor, I saw that each room was glowing with the superlunary light that was outlined by each window frame. In the library I paused and approached one of the windows, reaching out to touch its wrinkled surface. And I felt a lively rippling in the glass, as if there truly was some force flowing within it, an uncanny sensation that my tingling fingertips will never be able to forget. But it was the scene beyond the glass that finally possessed my attention.

For a few moments I looked out only upon the level landscape that surrounded the house, its open expanse lying desolate and pale beneath the resplendent heavens. Then, almost inconspicuously, different scenes or fragments of scenes began to intrude upon the outside vicinity, as if other geographies of the earth were being superimposed upon the local one, composing a patchwork of images that might seem to have been the hallucinated tableaux of some cosmic tapestry.

The windows—which, for lack of a more accurate term, I must call enchanted—had done their work. For the visions they offered were indeed those of a haunted world, a multifaceted mural portraying the marriage of insanity and metaphysics. As the images clarified, I witnessed all the intersections which commonly remain unseen to earthly sight, the conjoining of planes of entity which should exclude each other and should no more be mingled than is flesh with the unliving objects that surround it. But this is precisely what took place in the scenes before me, and it appeared there ex-

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upon room through a maze of interconnecting doors which Spare had left open, there seemed to be an escalation in the optical power of the windows, thus heightening the threat to the house and its inhabitants. What had appeared, through the windows of the floor below, as scenes in which spectral monstrosities had merely intruded upon orthodox reality, were now magnified to the point where that reality underwent a further eclipse: the other realm became dominant and pushed through the cover of masks, the concealment of stones, spread its moldy growths at will, generating apparitions of the most feverish properties and intentions, erecting formations that enshadowed all familiar order.

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And with each repetition of this last word it seemed that a struggle was taking place and that the echoing alien voice was fading as the tones of Spare's natural voice was gaining dominance. Finally, Spare appeared to have resumed full possession of himself. Then there was a pause, a brief interim during which I considered a number of doubtful strategies, anxious not to misuse this moment of unknown and extravagant possibilities. Was it merely the end of life that faced one who remained in that room? Could the experience that had preceded the disappearance of that other visionary, under identical circumstances, perhaps be worth the strange price one would be asked to pay? No occult theories, no arcane analyses, could be of any use in making my decision, nor justly serve the sensations of those few seconds, when I stood gripping the handle of that door, waiting for the impulse or accident that would decide everything. All

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From the other side of the door there now came a low, echoing laughter, a sound which became louder as the laughing one approached. But I was not moved by this sound and did nothing except grip the door handle more tightly, dreaming of the great shadows in the stars, of the strange visions beyond the windows, and of an infinite catastrophe. Then I heard a soft scraping noise at my feet; looking down, I saw several small rectangles projecting from under the door, fanned out like a hand of cards. My only action was to stoop and retrieve one of them, to stare in mindless wonderment at the mysterious symbol which decorated its face. I counted the others, realizing that none had been left attached to the windows within the room in the turret.

It was the thought of what effect these windows might have, now that they had been stripped of their protective signs and stood in the full glare of starlight, that made me call out to Spare, even though I could not be sure that he still existed as his former self. But by then the hollow laughter had stopped, and I am sure that the last voice I heard was that of Raymond Spare. And when the voice began screaming—the windows, it said, pulling me into the stars and shadows—I could not help trying to enter the room. But now that the impetus for this action had arrived, it proved to be useless for both Spare and myself. For the door was securely locked, and Spare's voice was fading into nothingness.

I can only imagine what those last few moments were like among all the windows of that turret room and among alien orders of existence beyond all definition. That night, it was to Spare alone that such secrets were confided; he was the

one to whom it fell—by some disaster or design—to be among the elect. Such privileged arcana, on this occasion at least, were not to be mine. Nevertheless, it seemed at the time that some fragment of this experience might be salvaged. And to do this, I believed, was a simple matter of abandoning the house.

My intuition was correct. For as soon as I had gone out into the night and turned back to face the house, I could see that its rooms were no longer empty, no longer the pristine apartments I had lamented earlier that evening. As I had thought, these windows were for looking in as well as out. And from where I stood, the sights were now all inside the house, which had become an edifice possessed by the festivities of another world. I remained there until morning, when a cold sunlight settled the motley phantasms of the night before.

Years later I had the opportunity to revisit the house. As expected, I found the place bare and abandoned: every one of its window frames was empty and there was not a sign of glass anywhere. In the nearby town I discovered that the house had also acquired a bad reputation. For years no one had gone near it. Wisely avoiding the enchantments of hell, the citizens of the town have kept to their own little streets of gently stirring trees and old silent houses. And what more can they do in the way of caution? How can they know what it is their houses are truly nestled among? They cannot see, nor even wish to see, that world of shadows with which they consort every moment of their brief and innocent lives. But often, perhaps during the visionary time of twilight, I am sure they have sensed it.

Miss Plarr
(2011 Grimscribe Version)

First published in *Weird Tales*, Winter 1991

It was spring, though still quite early in the season, when a young woman came to live with us. Her purpose was to manage the affairs of the household while my mother was suffering some vague ailment, lingering but not serious, and my father was away on business. She arrived on one of those misty, drizzling days which often prevailed during the young months of that particular year and which remain in my memory as the signature of this remarkable time. Since my mother was self-confined to her bed and my father absent, it was left for me to answer those sharp, urgent rappings at the front door. How they echoed throughout the many rooms of the house, reverberating in the farthest corners of the upper floors.

Pulling on the curved metal door handle, so huge in my child's hand, I found her standing with her back to me and staring deep into a world of darkening mist. Her black hair glistened in the light from the vestibule. As she turned slowly around, my eyes were fixed upon that great ebony turban of hair, folded so elaborately into itself again and again yet in some way rebelling against this discipline, with many shiny strands escaping their bonds and bursting out wildly. Indeed, it was through a straggle of mist-covered locks that she first glared down at me, saying: “My name is…”

“I know,” I said.

But at that moment it was not so much her name that I knew, despite my father's diligent recitations of it to me, as all the unexpected correspondences I sensed in her physical presence. For even after she stepped into the house, she kept her head slightly turned and glanced over her shoulder through the open door, watching the elements outside and listening with intense expectancy. By then this stranger had already gained a precise orientation amid the world's chaos of faces and other phenomena. Quite literally her place was an obscure one, lying somewhere deep within the peculiar mood of that spring afternoon when the natural gestures of the season had been apparently distanced and suppressed by an otherworldly desolation—a seething luxuriance hidden behind dark battlements of clouds looming above a bare, practically hibernal landscape. And the sounds for which she listened also seemed remote and stifled, shut out by a mute and sullen twilight, smothered in that tower of stone-gray sky.

However, while Miss Plarr appeared to reflect with exactitude all the signs and mannerisms of those days all shackled in gloom, her place in our household was still an uncertainty.

During the early part of her stay with us, Miss Plarr was more often heard than seen. Her duties, whether by instruction or her own interpretation, had soon engaged her in a routine of wandering throughout the echoing rooms and hallways of the house. Rarely was there an interruption in those footsteps as they sounded upon aged floorboards; day and night this gentle crepitating signaled the whereabouts of our vigilant housekeeper. In the morning I awoke to the

movements of Miss Plarr on the floors above or below my bedroom, while late in the afternoon, when I often spent time in the library upon my return from school, I could hear the clip-clopping of her heels on the parquet in the adjacent room. Even late at night, when the structure of the house expressed itself with a fugue of noises, Miss Plarr augmented this decrepit music with her own slow pacing upon the stairs or outside my door.

One time I felt myself awakened in the middle of the night, though it was not any disturbing sounds that had broken my sleep. And I was unsure exactly what made it impossible for me to close my eyes again. Finally, I slid out of bed, quietly opened the door of my room a few inches, and peeped down the darkened hallway. At the end of that long passage was a window filled with the livid radiance of moonlight, and within the frame of that window was Miss Plarr, her entire form shaded into a silhouette as black as the blackness of her hair, which was all piled up into the wild shape of some night-blossom. So intently was she staring out the window that she did not seem to detect my observance of her. I, on the other hand, could no longer ignore the force of her presence.

The following day I began a series of sketches. These works first took form as doodles in the margins of my school books, but swiftly evolved into projects of greater size and ambition. Given the enigmas of any variety of creation, I was not entirely surprised that the images I had elaborated did not include the overt portrayal of Miss Plarr herself, nor of other persons who might serve by way of symbolism or association. Instead, my drawings appeared to illustrate scenes from a tale of some strange and cruel kingdom. Possessed by

curious moods and visions, I depicted a bleak domain that was obscured by a kind of fog or cloud whose depths brought forth a plethora of incredible structures, all of them somehow twisted into aspects of bizarre savagery. From the matrix of this fertile haze was born a litter of towering edifices that combined the traits of castle and crypt, many-peaked palace and multi-chambered mausoleum. But there were also clusters of smaller buildings, warped offshoots of the greater ones, housing perhaps no more than a single room, an apartment of ominously skewed design, an intimate dungeon cell reserved for the most exclusive captivity. Of course, I betrayed no special genius in my execution of these phantasmal venues: my technique was as barbarous as my subject. And certainly I was unable to introduce into the menacing images any suggestion of certain sounds that seemed integral to their proper representation, a kind of aural accompaniment to these operatic stage sets. In fact, I was not able even to imagine these sounds with any degree of clarity. Yet I knew that they belonged in the pictures, and that, like the purely visible dimension of these works, their source could be found in the person of Miss Plarr.

Although I had not intended to show her the sketches, there was evidence that she had indulged in private viewings of them. They lay more or less in the open on the desk in my bedroom; I made no effort to conceal my work. And I began to suspect that their order was being disturbed in my absence, to sense a subtle disarrangement that was vaguely telling but not conclusive. Finally, upon returning from school one gray afternoon, I discovered a sure sign of Miss Plarr's investigations. For lying between two of my draw-

ings, pressed like a memento in an old scrapbook, was a long, black strand of hair.

I wanted to confront Miss Plarr immediately regarding her intrusion, not because I resented it in any way but solely to seize the occasion to approach this devious eccentric and perhaps draw closer to the strange sights and sounds she had brought into our household. However, at that stage of her term of employment she was no longer so easily located, having ceased her constant, noisy marauding and begun practising more sedentary or stealthy rituals.

Since there was no sign of her elsewhere in the house, I went directly to the room which had been set aside for her, and which I had previously respected as her sanctum. But as I slowly stepped up to the open doorway I saw that she was not there. After entering the room and rummaging about, I realized that she was not using it at all and perhaps had never settled in. I turned around to continue my search for Miss Plarr when I found her standing silently in the doorway and gazing into the room without fixing her eyes on anything, or anyone, within it. I nevertheless appeared to be in a position of chastisement, losing all the advantage I earlier possessed over this invader of *my* sanctum. Yet there was no mention of either of these transgressions, despite what seemed our mutual understanding of them. We were helplessly drifting into an abyss of unspoken reproaches and suspicions. Finally, Miss Plarr rescued us both by making an announcement she had obviously been saving for the right moment.

"I have spoken with your mother," she declared in a strong voice, "and we have concluded that I should begin tutoring you in some of your weaker school subjects."

I believe that I must have nodded, or offered some other gesture of assent. “Good,” she said. “We will start tomorrow.”

Then, rather quietly, she walked away, leaving her words to resound in the cavity of that unoccupied room—unoccupied, I may claim, since my own presence now seemed to have been eclipsed by the swelling shadow of Miss Plarr. Nonetheless, this extra-scholastic instruction did prove of immense value in illuminating what, at the time, was my weakest subject: Miss Plarr in general, with special attention to where she had made accommodations for herself in our household.

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My tutelage was conducted in a room that Miss Plarr felt was especially suited to the purpose, though her reasoning may not have been readily apparent. For the place she had selected to impart her lessons to me was a small attic located beneath a roof toward the back of the house. The slanted ceiling of that room exposed to us its rotting beams like the ribbing of some ancient seagoing vessel that might carry us to unknown destinations. And there were cold drafts that eddied around us, opposing currents emanating from the warped frame in which a many-paned window softly rattled now and then. The light by which I was schooled was provided by overcast afternoons fading in that window, assisted by an old oil lamp which Miss Plarr had hung upon a nail in one of the attic rafters. (I still wonder where she unearthed that antique.) It was this greasy lamplight that enabled me to glimpse a heap of old rags which had been piled

in a corner to form a kind of crude bedding. Nearby stood the suitcase Miss Plarr had arrived with.

The only furniture in this room was a low table, which served as my desk, and a small frail chair, both articles being relics of my early childhood and no doubt rediscovered in the course of my teacher's many expeditions throughout the house. Seated at the center of the room, I submitted to the musty pathos of my surroundings. “In a room such as this,” Miss Plarr asserted, “one may learn certain things of the greatest importance.” So I listened while Miss Plarr clomped noisily about, wielding a long wooden pointer which had no blackboard to point to. All considered, however, she did deliver a series of quite fascinating lectures.

Without attempting to render the exact rhetoric of her discourse, I remember that Miss Plarr was especially concerned with my development in subjects that often touched upon history or geography, occasionally broaching realms of philosophy and science. She lectured from memory, never once hesitating in her delivery of countless facts that had not reached me by way of the conventional avenues of my education. Yet these talks were nonetheless as meandering as her footsteps upon the cold floor of that attic room, and at first I was breathless trying to follow her from one point to the next. Eventually, though, I began to extract certain themes from her chaotic syllabus. For instance, she returned time and again to the earliest twitchings of human life, portraying a world of only the most rudimentary law but one intriguingly advanced in what she called “visceral practices.” She allowed that much of what she said in this way was speculative. In her discussions of later periods, she deferred to the restrictions, while also enjoying the explicitness, of ac-

cepted records. Hence, I was made intimate with those ancient atrocities which gained renown for a Persian monarch, with a century-old massacre in the Brazilian backlands, and with the specific methods of punishment employed by various societies often relegated to the margins of history. And in other flights of instruction, during which Miss Plarr might flourish her pointer in the air like an artist's paintbrush, I was introduced to lands whose chief feature was a kind of brutality and an air of exile—coarse and tortuous terrains, deliriums of earth and sky. These included desolate, fog-bound islands in polar seas, countries of barren peaks lacerated by unceasing winds, wastelands that consumed all sense of reality in their vast spaces, shadowed realms littered with dead cities, and sweltering hells of jungle where light itself is tinged with a bluish slime.

At some point, however, Miss Plarr's specialized curriculum, once so novel and engrossing, dulled with repetition. I started to fidget in my miniature seat; my head slumped over my miniature desk. Then her words suddenly stopped, and she drew close to me, laying her rubber-tipped pointer across my shoulder. When I looked up I saw only those eyes glaring down at me, and that black bundle of hair outlined in the dismal light drifting through the attic like a glowing vapor.

"In a room such as this," she whispered, "one may also learn the *proper* way to behave."

The pointer was then pulled away, grazing my neck, and Miss Plarr walked over to the window. Outside, one of the great mists of that spring obscured the landscape. As if seen through murky sheets of ice, everything appeared remote and hallucinatory. An indeterminate figure herself, Miss

Plarr gazed out at a world of shadows bound in place. She also seemed to be listening to it.

"Do you know the sound of something that stings the air?" she asked, swinging her pointer lightly against herself.

I understood her meaning and nodded my compliance. But at the same time I imagined more than a teacher's switch as it came down upon a pupil's body. Sounds more serious and more strange intruded upon the hush of the classroom. They were faraway sounds lost in the hissing of rainy afternoons: immense blades sweeping over vast spaces; expansive wings cutting through cold winds; long whips lashing in darkness. I also heard the sound of things that were "stinging the air" in places beyond all comprehension. These sounds grew increasingly louder. Finally, Miss Plarr dropped her pointer and put her hands over her ears.

"That will be all for today," she shouted.

And neither did she hold class on the following day, nor ever again resume my tutelage.

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It seemed, however, that my lessons with Miss Plarr had continued in a different form. Those afternoons in that attic must have exhausted something within me, and for a brief time I was unable to leave my bed. During this period I noticed that Miss Plarr was suffering a decline of her own, allowing the intangible sympathies which had already existed between us to become so much deeper and more entangled. To some extent it might be said that my own process of degeneration was following hers, much as my faculty of hearing, sensitized by illness, followed her echoing footsteps as they moved about the house. For Miss Plarr had reverted to

her restless wandering, somehow having failed to settle herself into any kind of repose.

On her visits to my room, which had become frequent and were always unexpected, I could observe the phases of her dissolution on both a material and a psychic level. Her hair now hung loose about her shoulders, twisting itself in the most hideous ways like a dark mesh of nightmares, a foul nest in which her own suspicions were swarming. Moreover, her links to a strictly mundane order had become shockingly decayed, and my relationship with her was conducted at the risk of intimacy with spheres of a highly questionable nature.

One afternoon I awoke from a nap to discover that all the drawings she had inspired me to produce had been torn to pieces and lay scattered about my room. But this primitive attempt at exorcism proved to have no effect, for in the late hours of that same night I found her sitting on my bed and leaning close to me, her hair brushing against my face. “Tell me about those sounds,” she demanded. “You've been doing this to frighten me, haven't you?” For a while I felt she had slipped away altogether, severing our extraordinary bond and allowing my health to improve. But just as I seemed to be approaching a full recovery, Miss Plarr returned.

“I think that you're much better now,” she said as she entered my room with a briskness that seemed to be an effort. “You can get dressed today. I have to do some shopping, and I want you to come along and assist me.”

I might have protested that to go out on such a day would cause me to relapse, for outside waited a heavy spring dampness and so much fog that I could see nothing beyond my bedroom window. But Miss Plarr was already lost to the

world of wholesome practicalities, while her manner betrayed a hypnotic and fateful determination that I could not have resisted.

"As for this fog," she said, even though I had not mentioned it, "I think we shall be able to find our way."

Having a child's weakness for prospects of misadventure, I followed Miss Plarr into that fog-smothered landscape. After walking only a few steps we lost sight of the house, and even the ground beneath our feet was submerged under layers of a pale, floating web. But she took my hand and marched on as if guided by some peculiar vision.

And it was by her grasp that this vision was conducted into me, setting both of us upon a strange path. Yet as we progressed, I began to recognize certain shapes gradually emerging around us—that brood of dark forms which pushed through the fog, as if their growth could no longer be contained by it. When I tightened my grip on Miss Plarr's hand—which seemed to be losing its strength, fading in its substance—the vision surged toward clarity. With the aspect of some leviathan rising into view from the abyss, a monstrous world defined itself before our eyes, forcing its way through the surface of the fog, which now trailed in wisps about the structures of an immense and awful kingdom.

More expansive and intricate than my earlier, purely artistic imaginings, these structures sprung forth like a patternless conglomerate of crystals, angular and many-faceted monuments clustering in a misty graveyard. It was a dead city indeed, and all residents were entombed within its walls —or they were nowhere. There were streets of a sort which cut through this chaos of architecture, winding among the lopsided buildings, and yet it all retained an interlocking

unity, much like a mountain range of wildly carved peaks and chasms and very much like the mountainous and murky thunderheads of a rainy season. Surely the very essence of a storm inhered in the jagged dynamism of these structures, a pyrotechnics that remained suspended or hidden, its violence a matter of suspicion and conjecture, suggesting a realm of atrocious potential—that infinite country which hovers beyond fogs and mists and gray heaping skies.

But even here something remained obscure, a sense provoked of rites or observances being enacted in concealment. And this peculiar sense was aroused by certain sounds, as of smothered cacophonous echoes lashing out in black cells and scourging the lengths of blind passages. Through the silence of the fog they gradually disseminated.

"Do you hear them?" asked Miss Plarr, though by then they had already risen to a conspicuous stridency. "There are rooms we cannot see where those sounds are being made. Sounds of something that stings the air."

Her eyes seemed to be possessed by the sight of these rooms she spoke of; her hair was mingling with the mist around us. Finally, she released her hold on my hand and drifted onward. There was no struggle: she had known for some time what loomed in the background of her wandering and what waited her approach. Perhaps she thought this was something she could pass on to others, or in which she might gain their company. But her company, her *proper* company, had all the time been preparing for her arrival elsewhere. Nevertheless, she had honored me as the heir of her visions.

The fog swept around her and thickened once again until there was nothing else that could be seen. After a few mo-

ments I managed to gain my geographical bearings, finding myself in the middle of the street only a few blocks from home.

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Soon after the disappearance of Miss Plarr, our household was again established in its routine: my mother made a strong recovery from her pseudo-illness and my father returned from his business excursion. The hired girl, it seemed, had vacated the house without giving notice, a turn of events that caused little surprise in my mother. “Such a flighty creature,” she said about our former housekeeper.

I supported this characterization of Miss Plarr, but offered nothing that might suggest the nature of her flight. In truth, no word of mine could possibly have brought the least clarity to the situation. Nor did I wish to deepen the mysteries of this episode by revealing what Miss Plarr had left behind in that attic room. For me this chamber was now invested with a dour mystique, and I revisited its drafty spaces on several occasions over the years. Especially on afternoons in early spring when I could not close my ears to certain sounds that reached me from beyond a gray mist or from skies of hissing rain, as if somewhere the tenuous forms of spirits were thrashing in a dark and forsaken world.

Miss Plarr
(1991 Grimscribe Version)

First published in *Weird Tales*, Winter 1991
Also published in: *Grimscribe*, *The Nightmare Factory*.

It was spring, though still quite early in the season, when a young woman came to live with us. Her purpose was to manage the affairs of the household while my mother was suffering some vague ailment, lingering but not serious, and my father was away on business. She arrived on one of those misty, drizzling days which often prevailed during the young months of that particular year and which remain in my memory as the signature of this remarkable time.

Since my mother was self-confined to her bed and my father absent, it was left for me to answer those sharp urgent rappings at the front door. How they echoed throughout the many rooms of the house, reverberating in the farthest comers of the upper floors.

Pulling on the curved metal door handle, so huge in my child's hand, I found her standing with her back to me and staring deep into a world of darkening mist. Her black hair glistened in the light from the vestibule. As she turned slowly around, my eyes were fixed upon that great ebony turban of hair, folded so elaborately into itself again and again yet in some way rebelling against this discipline, with many shiny strands escaping their bonds and bursting out wildly. Indeed, it was through a straggle of mist-covered

locks that she first glared down at me, saying: “My name is…”

“I know,” I said.

But at that moment it was not so much her name that I knew, despite my father's diligent recitations of it to me, as all the unexpected correspondences I sensed in her physical presence. For even after she stepped into the house, she kept her head slightly turned and glanced over her shoulder through the open door, watching the elements outside and listening with intense expectancy. By then this stranger had already gained a precise orientation amid the world's chaos of faces and other phenomena. Quite literally her place was an obscure one, lying somewhere deep within the peculiar mood of that spring afternoon when the natural gestures of the season had been apparently distanced and suppressed by an otherworldly desolation-a seething luxuriance hidden behind dark battlements of clouds looming above a bare, practically hibernal landscape. And the sounds for which she listened also seemed remote and stifled, shut out by a mute and sullen twilight, smothered in that tower of stone-gray sky.

However, while Miss Plarr appeared to reflect with exactitude all the signs and mannerisms of those days all shackled in gloom, her place in our household was still an uncertainty.

During the early part of her stay with us, Miss Plarr was more often heard than seen. Her duties, whether by instruction or her own interpretation, had soon engaged her in a routine of wandering throughout the echoing rooms and hallways of the house. Rarely was there an interruption in those footsteps as they sounded upon aged floorboards; day

and night these gentle crepitations signaled the whereabouts of our vigilant housekeeper. In the morning I awoke to the movements of Miss Plarr on the floors above or below my bedroom, while late in the afternoon, when I often spent time in the library upon my return from school,

I could hear the clip-clopping of her heels on the parquet in the adjacent room. Even late at night, when the structure of the house expressed itself with a fugue of noises, Miss Plarr augmented this decrepit music with her own slow pacing upon the stairs or outside my door.

One time I felt myself awakened in the middle of the night, though it was not any disturbing sounds that had broken my sleep. And I was unsure exactly what made it impossible for me to close my eyes again. Finally, I slid out of bed, quietly opened the door of my room a few inches, and peeped down the darkened hallway. At the end of that long passage was a window filled with the livid radiance of moonlight, and within the frame of that window was Miss Plarr, her entire form shaded into a silhouette as black as the blackness of her hair, which was all piled up into the wild shape of some night-blossom. So intently was she staring out the window that she did not seem to detect my observance of her. I, on the other hand, could no longer ignore the force of her presence.

The following day I began a series of sketches. These works first took form as doodles in the margins of my school books, but swiftly evolved into projects of greater size and ambition. Given the enigmas of any variety of creation, I was not entirely surprised that the images I had elaborated did not include the overt portrayal of Miss Plarr herself, nor of other persons who might serve by way of symbolism or asso-

ciation. Instead, my drawings appeared to illustrate scenes from a tale of some strange and cruel kingdom. Possessed by curious moods and visions, I depicted a bleak domain that was obscured by a kind of fog or cloud whose depths brought forth a plethora of incredible structures, all of them somehow twisted into aspects of bizarre savagery. From the matrix of this fertile haze was born a litter of towering edifices that combined the traits of castle and crypt, many-peaked palace and multi-chambered mausoleum. But there were also clusters of smaller buildings, warped offshoots of the greater ones, housing perhaps no more than a single room, an apartment of ominously skewed design, an intimate dungeon cell reserved for the most exclusive captivity. Of course, I betrayed no special genius in my execution of these fantasmal venues: my technique was as barbarous as my subject. And certainly I was unable to introduce into the menacing images any suggestion of certain sounds that seemed integral to their proper representation, a kind of aural accompaniment to these operatic stage sets. In fact, I was not able even to imagine these sounds with any degree of clarity. Yet I knew that they belonged in the pictures, and that, like the purely visible dimension of these works, their source could be found in the person of Miss Plarr.

Although I had not intended to show her the sketches, there was evidence that she had indulged in private viewings of them. They lay more or less in the open on the desk in my bedroom; I made no effort to conceal my work. And I began to suspect that their order was being disturbed in my absence, to sense a subtle disarrangement that was vaguely telling but not conclusive. Finally, she gave herself away. One gray afternoon, upon returning from school, I discovered a

sure sign of Miss Plarr's investigations. For lying between two of my drawings, pressed like a memento in an old scrapbook, was a long black strand of hair.

I wanted to confront Miss Plarr immediately regarding her intrusion, not because I resented it in any way but solely to seize the occasion to approach this devious eccentric and perhaps draw closer to the strange sights and sounds she had brought into our household. However, at that stage of her term of employment she was no longer so easily located, having ceased her constant, noisy marauding and begun practising more sedentary, even stealthy rituals.

Since there was no sign of her elsewhere in the house, I went directly to the room which had been set aside for her, and which I had previously respected as her sanctum. But as I slowly stepped up to the open doorway I saw that she was not there. After entering the room and rummaging about, I realized that she was not using it at all and perhaps had never settled in. I turned around to continue my search for Miss Plarr when I found her standing silently in the doorway and gazing into the room without fixing her eyes on anything, or anyone, within it. I nevertheless appeared to be in a position of chastisement, losing all the advantage I earlier possessed over this invader of my sanctum. Yet there was no mention of either of these transgressions, despite what seemed our mutual understanding of them. We were helplessly drifting into an abyss of unspoken reproaches and suspicions. Finally, Miss Plarr rescued us both by making an announcement she had obviously been saving for the right moment.

“I have spoken with your mother,” she declared in a strong voice, “and we have concluded that I should begin tu-

toring you in some of your… weaker school subjects."

I believe that I must have nodded, or offered some other gesture of assent. "Good," she said. "We will start tomorrow. "

Then, rather quietly, she walked away, leaving her words to resound in the cavity of that unoccupied room-unoccupied, I may claim, since my own presence now seemed to have been eclipsed by the swelling shadow of Miss Plarr. Nonetheless, this extra-scholastic intruction did prove of immense value in illuminating what, at the time, was my weakest subject: Miss Plarr in general, with special attention to where she had made accommodations for herself in our household.

My tutorship was conducted in a room which Miss Plarr felt was especially suited to the purpose, though her reasoning may not have been readily apparent. For the place she had selected as her classroom was a small, remote attic located beneath the highest and westernmost roof of the house. The slanted ceiling of that room exposed to us its rotting beams like the ribbing of some ancient seagoing vessel that might carry us to unknown destinations. And there were cold drafts that eddied around us, opposing currents emanating from the warped frame in which a many-paned window softly rattled now and then. The light by which I was schooled was provided by overcast afternoons fading in that window, assisted by an old oil lamp which Miss Plarr had hung upon a nail in one of the attic rafters. (I still wonder where she unearthed this antique.) It was this greasy lamplight that enabled me to glimpse a heap of old rags which had been piled in a comer to form a kind of crude bedding. Nearby stood the suitcase Miss Plarr had arrived with.

The only furniture in this room was a low table, which served as my desk, and a small frail chair, both articles being relics of my early childhood and no doubt rediscovered in the course of my teacher's many expeditions throughout the house. Seated at the center of the room, I submitted to the musty pathos of my surroundings. “In a room such as this,” Miss Plarr asserted, “one may learn certain things of the greatest importance.” So I listened while Miss Plarr clomped noisily about, wielding a long wooden pointer which had no blackboard to point to. All considered, however, she did deliver a series of quite fascinating lectures.

Without attempting to render the exact rhetoric of her discourse, I remember that Miss Plarr was especially concerned with my development in subjects that often touched upon history or geography, occasionally broaching realms of philosophy and science. She lectured from memory, never once misstepping in her delivery of countless facts that had not reached me by way of the conventional avenues of my education. Yet these talks were nonetheless as meandering as her footsteps upon the cold floor of that attic room, and at first I was breathless trying to follow her from one point to the next. Eventually, though, I began to extract certain themes from her chaotic syllabus. For instance, she returned time and again to the earliest twitchings of human life, portraying a world of only the most rudimentary law but one so intriguingly advanced in what she called “visceral practices”. She allowed that much of what she said in this way was speculative, and her discussions of later periods deferred to the restrictions, while also enjoying the explicitness, of accepted records. Hence, I was made intimate with those ancient atrocities which gained renown for a Persian monarch, with a

century-old massacre in the Brazilian backlands, and with the curious methods of punishment employed by various societies often relegated to the margins of history. And in other flights of instruction, during which Miss Plarr might flourish her pointer in the air like an artist's paintbrush, I was introduced to lands whose chief feature was a kind of brutality and an air of exile—coarse and torturous terrains, deliriums of earth and sky. These included desolate mist-bound islands in polar seas, countries of barren peaks lacerated by unceasing winds, wastelands that consumed all sense of reality in their vast spaces, shadowed realms littered with dead cities, and sweltering hells of jungle where light itself is tinged with a bluish slime.

At some point, however, Miss Plarr's specialized curriculum, once so novel and engrossing, dulled with repetition. I started to fidget in my miniature seat; or my head would slump over my miniature desk. Then her words suddenly stopped, and she drew close to me, laying her rubber-tipped pointer across my shoulder. When I looked up I saw only those eyes glaring down at me, and that black bundle of hair outlined in the dismal light drifting through the attic like a glowing vapor.

"In a room such as this," she whispered, "one may also learn the *proper* way to behave."

The pointer was then pulled away, grazing my neck, and Miss Plarr walked over to the window. Outside were effervescent clouds of mist which hung down over trees and houses. The scene was held immobile by the mist as if captured within the murky depths of ice; everything appeared remote or hallucinatory, shadows bound to a misty shore.

All was silence, and Miss Plarr gazed out at a world suspended in obscurity. But she was also listening to it.

"Do you know the sound of something that stings the air?" she asked, swinging her pointer lightly against herself. "You will know that sound if you do not act properly. Do you hear me?"

I understood her meaning and nodded my compliance.

But at the same time I seemed to hear more than a teacher's switch as it came down upon a pupil's body. Sounds more serious and more strange intruded upon the hush of the classroom. They were faraway sounds lost in the hissing of rainy afternoons: great blades sweeping over great distances, expansive wings cutting through cold winds, long whips lashing in darkness. I heard other sounds, too, other things that were stinging the air in other places, sounds of things I heard but could never give explanation. These sounds grew increasingly louder. Finally, Miss Plarr dropped her pointer and put her hands over her ears.

"That will be all for today," she shouted.

And neither did she hold class on the following day, nor ever again resume my tutorship.

It seemed, however, that my lessons with Miss Plarr had continued their effect in a different form. Those afternoons in that attic must have exhausted something within me, and for a brief time I was unable to leave my bed. During this period I noticed that Miss Plarr was suffering a decline of her own, allowing the intangible sympathies which had already existed between us to become so much deeper and more entangled. To some extent it might be said that my own process of degeneration was following hers, much as my faculty of hearing, sensitized by illness, followed her

echoing footsteps as they moved about the house. For Miss Plarr had reverted to her restless wandering, somehow having failed to settle herself into any kind of repose.

On her visits to my room, which had become frequent and were always unexpected, I could observe the phases of her dissolution on both the material and the psychic level. Her hair now hung loose about her shoulders, twisting itself in the most hideous ways like a dark mesh of nightmares, a foul nest in which her own suspicions were swarming. Moreover, her links to strictly mundane elements had become shockingly decayed, and my relationship with her was conducted at the risk of intimacy with spheres of a highly questionable order.

One afternoon I awoke from a nap to discover that all the drawings she had inspired me to produce had been torn to pieces and lay scattered about my room. But this primitive attempt at exorcism proved to have no effect, for in the late hours of that same night I found her sitting on my bed and leaning close to me, her hair brushing against my face. “Tell me about those sounds,” she demanded. “You've been doing this to frighten me, haven't you?” For a while I felt she had slipped away altogether, severing our extraordinary bond and allowing my health to improve. But just as I seemed to be approaching a full recovery, Miss Plarr returned.

“I think that you're much better now,” she said as she entered my room with a briskness that seemed to be an effort. “You can get dressed today. I have to do some shopping, and I want you to come along and assist me.”

I might have protested that to go out on such a day would promise me a relapse, for outside waited a heavy spring dampness and so much fog that I could see nothing beyond

my bedroom window. But Miss Plarr was already lost to the world of wholesome practicalities, while her manner betrayed a hypnotic and fateful determination that I could not have resisted.

"As for this fog," she said, even though I had not mentioned it, "I think we shall be able to find our way."

Having a child's weakness for miracles, I followed Miss Plarr into that fog-smothered landscape. After walking only a few steps we lost sight of the house, and even the ground beneath our feet was submerged under layers of a pale, floating web. But she took my hand and marched on as if guided by some peculiar vision.

And it was by her grasp that this vision was conducted into me, setting both of us upon a strange path. Yet as we progressed, I began to recognize certain shapes gradually emerging around us that brood of dark forms which pushed through the fog, as if their growth could no longer be contained by it. When I tightened my grip on Miss Plarr's hand —which seemed to be losing its strength, fading in its substance—the vision surged toward clarity. With the aspect of some leviathan rising into view from the abyss, a monstrous world defined itself before our eyes, forcing its way through the surface of the fog, which now trailed in wisps about the structures of an immense and awful kingdom.

More expansive and intricate than my earlier, purely artistic imaginings, these structures sprung forth like a patternless conglomerate of crystals, angular and many-faceted monuments clustering in a misty graveyard. It was a dead city indeed, and all residents were entombed within its walls or they were nowhere. There were streets of a sort which cut through this chaos of architecture, winding among the lop-

sided buildings, and yet it all retained an interlocking unity, much like a mountain range of wildly carved peaks and chasms and very much like the mountainous and murky thunderheads of a rainy season. Surely the very essence of a storm inhered in the jagged dynamism of these structures, a pyrotechnics that remained suspended or hidden, its violence a matter of suspicion and conjecture, suggesting a realm of atrocious potential—that infinite country which hovers beyond fogs and mists and gray heaping skies.

But even here something remained obscure, a sense provoked of rites or observances being enacted in concealment. And this peculiar sense was aroused by certain sounds, as of smothered cacophonous echoes lashing out in black cells and scourging the lengths of blind passages. Through the silence of the fog they gradually disseminated.

"Do you hear them?" asked Miss Plarr, though by then they had already risen to a conspicuous stridency. "There are rooms we cannot see where those sounds are being made. Sounds of something that stings the air."

Her eyes seemed to be possessed by the sight of these rooms she spoke of; her hair was mingling with the mist around us. Finally, she released her hold on my hand and drifted onward. There was no struggle: she had known for some time what loomed in the background of her wandering and what waited her approach. Perhaps she thought this was something she could pass on to others, or in which she might gain their company. But her company, her proper company, had all the time been preparing for her arrival elsewhere. Nevertheless, she had honored me as the heir of her visions.

The fog swept around her and thickened once again until there was nothing else that could be seen. After a few moments I managed to gain my geographical bearings, finding myself in the middle of the street only a few blocks from home.

Soon after the disappearance of Miss Plarr, our household was again established in its routine: my mother made a strong recovery from her pseudo-illness and my father returned from his business excursion. The hired girl, it seemed, had vacated the house without giving notice, a turn of events that caused little surprise in my mother. “Such a flighty creature,” she said about our former housekeeper.

I supported this characterization of Miss Plarr, but offered nothing that might suggest the nature of her flight. In truth, no word of mine could possibly have brought the least clarity to the situation. Nor did I wish to deepen the mysteries of this episode by revealing what Miss Plarr had left behind in that attic room. For me this chamber was now invested with a dour mystique, and I revisited its drafty spaces on several occasions over the years. Especially on afternoons in early spring when I could not close my ears to certain sounds that reached me from beyond a gray mist or from skies of hissing rain, as if somewhere the tenuous forms of spirits were thrashing in a dark and forsaken world.

Mrs Rinaldi's Angel (2011 Noctuary Version)

First published in A *Whisper Of Blood*, November 1991

Throughout my childhood, the dreams that I nightly experienced would become brutally vivid, causing me to awake screaming. The shouting done, I sank back into my bed in a state of debilitation resulting from the bodiless adventures imposed upon my slumbering self. Over time, I was exercised harshly by this nocturnal regimen with its visions both crystalline and confused. This activity, however immaterial, drained my reserves of strength and in a few moments stole from me the benefits of a full night's sleep. Nevertheless, while I was deprived of the privilege of a natural rest, there may also have been some profit gained: the awful opulence of the dream, a rich and swollen world nourished by the exhaustion of the flesh. The world, in fact, *as such*. Any other realm seemed an absence by comparison, at best a chasm in the fertile graveyard of life.

Of course my parents did not share my feelings on this subject. “What is *wrong* with him?” I heard my father bellow from far down the hallway, his voice full of reproach. Shortly afterward my mother was by my side. “They seem to be getting worse,” she would say. Then on one occasion she whispered, “I think it's time we did something about this problem.”

The tone of her voice told me that what she had in mind was not the doctor's appointment so often urged by my

father. Hers was a more dubious quest for a curative, though one which no doubt also seemed more appropriate to my "suffering." My mother was always prone to the enticements of superstition, and my troubled dreams appeared to justify an indulgence in unorthodox measures. Her shining and solemn gaze betrayed her own dreams of trafficking with esoteric forces, of being on familiar terms with specialists in a secret universe, entrepreneurs of the intangible.

"Tomorrow your father is leaving early on business. You stay home from school, and then we'll go and visit a woman I know."

Late the following morning, my mother and I went to a house in one of the outlying neighborhoods of town and were graciously invited to be seated in the parlor of the long-widowed Mrs. Rinaldi. Perhaps it was my dream-inflicted fatigue that made it so difficult to consolidate any lucid thoughts or feelings about the old woman and her remote house. Although the well-ordered room we occupied was flush with sunlight, this illumination somehow acted in the way of a wash over a watercolor painting, blurring the outline of things and subduing the clarity of surfaces. This obscurity was not dispersed even by the large and thickly shaded lamp Mrs. Rinaldi kept lighted beside the small divan on which she and my mother sat. I was close to them in an old but respectably upholstered armchair, and yet their forms refused to come into focus, just as everything else in that room resisted definition. How well I knew such surroundings, those deep interiors of dream where everything is saturated with unreality and more or less dissolves under a direct gaze. I could tell how neatly this particular interior was arranged—pictures perfectly straight and tight against

the walls, well-dusted figurines arranged along open shelves, lace-fringed table covers set precisely in place, and delicate silk flowers in slim vases of colored glass. Yet there was something so fragile about the balance of these things, as if they were all susceptible to sudden derangement should there be some upset, no matter how subtle, in the secret system which held them together. This volatility seemed to extend to Mrs. Rinaldi herself, though in fact she may have been its source.

Casually examined, she appeared to present only the usual mysteries of old women who might be expected to speak with a heavy accent, whether or not they actually did so. She wore the carnal bulk and simple attire of a peasant race, and her calm manner indeed epitomized the peasant quietude of popular conception: her hands folded without tremor upon a wide lap and her eyes mildly attentive. But those eyes were so pale, as were her complexion and gauzy hair. It was as if some great strain had depleted her, and was continually depleting her, of the strong coloring she once possessed, draining her powers and leaving her vulnerable to some tenuous onslaught. At any moment during the time my mother was explaining why we sought out her help, Mrs. Rinaldi might have degenerated before our eyes, finally succumbing to spectral afflictions she had spent so many years fending off, both for her own sake and for the sake of others. And still she might have easily been mistaken for just another old woman whose tidy parlor displayed no object or image that would betray her most questionable and perilous occupation.

“Missus,” she said to my mother, though her eyes were on me, “I would like to take your son into another room in this

house. There I believe I may begin to help him."

My mother assented and Mrs. Rinaldi escorted me down a hallway to a room at the back of the house. The room reminded me of a little shop of some kind, one that kept its merchandise hidden in dark cabinets along the walls, in great chests upon the floor, and in boxes and cases of every sort piled here and there. Nothing except these receptacles, this array of multiform exteriors, was exposed to view. A single window was tightly shuttered and a bare light bulb hanging overhead served as the room's only illumination.

There was nowhere to sit, only empty floor space. Mrs. Rinaldi took my hand and stood me at the center of the room. After gazing rather sternly into my eyes for some moments, she proceeded to pace slowly around me.

"Do you know what dreams are?" she asked quietly, and then immediately began to answer her own question. "They are parasites—maggots of the mind and soul, feeding on the mind and soul as ordinary maggots feed on the body. And their feeding on the mind and soul in turn gnaws away at the body, which in turn again affects the mind and the soul, and so on until death. These things cannot be separated, nor can anything else. Because everything is terribly inseparable and affects every other thing. Even the most alien things are connected together with every other thing. And so if these dreams have no world of their own to nourish them, they may come into yours and possess it, exhaust it little by little each night. They use your world and use it up. They wear your face and the faces of things you know: things that are yours they use in ways that are theirs. And some persons are so easy for them to use, and they use them very strenuously. In fact, they use everyone and have always used everyone,

because they are from the old time, the time before all the worlds awoke from a long and mindless night. And these dreams, these things that are called dreams, are still working to throw us back into that great mad darkness, to exhaust each one of us in our lonely sleep and to use up everyone until death. Little by little, night after night, they take us away from ourselves and from the truth of things. I myself know very well what this can be like and what the dreams can do to us. They make us dance to their strange illusions until we are too exhausted to live. And they have found in you, child, an easy partner for their horrible dancing."

With these words Mrs. Rinaldi not only revealed a side of herself quite different from the serene wise woman my mother had seen, but she also took me much deeper into things I had merely suspected until that day in the room where chests and strange boxes were piled up everywhere and great cabinets loomed along the walls, so many tightly closed doors and drawers and locked-up lids with so many things inside them.

"Of course," she went on, "these dreams of yours cannot be wholly exorcised from your life, but only driven back so that they may not do *extraordinary* harm. They will still triumph in the end, denying us not just the restoration of nightly sleep. For ultimately they steal away the time which might have measured into immortality. They corrupt us in *every way*, abducting us from the ranks of angels we might have been or become, pure and calm and everlasting. It is because of them that we endure such a meager allotment of years, with all their foulness. This is all I can offer you, child, even if you may not understand what it means. For it

is surely not meant that you should fall into the fullest corruption before your time."

Her speech concluded, Mrs. Rinaldi stood before me, massive and motionless, her breathing now a bit labored. I confess that her theories intrigued me as far as I could comprehend them, for at the time her statements regarding the meaning and mechanisms of dreams appeared to be founded on somewhat questionable assumptions, unnecessarily outlandish in their departures from the oldest orthodoxies of creation. Nonetheless, I decided not to resist whatever applications she chose to make of her ideas. On her side, she was scrutinizing my small form with some intensity, engaged in what seemed a psychic sizing up of my presence, as if she were seriously unsure whether or not it was safe to move on to the next step with me.

Apparently resolving her doubts, she shuffled over to a tall cabinet, unlocked its door with a key she had taken from a sagging pocket in her dress, and from within removed two items: a slim decanter half filled with a dark red liquid, presumably wine, and a shallow wide-mouthed drinking glass. Carrying these objects back to me, she put out her right hand, in which she held the glass, and said: "Take this and spit into it." After I had done this, she poured some of the wine into the glass and then replaced the decanter in its cabinet, which she locked once again. "Now kneel down on the floor," she ordered. "Don't let anything spill out of the glass, and don't get up until I tell you to do so. I'm going to turn out the light."

Even in total darkness, Mrs. Rinaldi maneuvered well about the room, her footsteps again moving away from me. I heard her opening another cabinet, or perhaps it was a large

chest whose heavy lid she struggled to push back, its hinges grinding in the darkness. A slight draft crossed the room, a current of air without scent and neither warm nor cold. Mrs. Rinaldi then approached, moving more slowly than she had before, as if bearing some weighty object. With a groan, she set it down, and I heard it scrape the floor inches from where I knelt, though I could not see what it was.

Suddenly a thin line of light scored the blackness, and I could see Mrs. Rinaldi's old finger slowly lifting the lid of a long low box from which the luminousness emanated. The glowing slit widened as the lid was drawn back farther, revealing a pale brilliance that seemed confined wholly within the box itself, casting not the least glimmer into the room. The source of this light was a kind of incandescent vapor that curled about in a way that seemed to draw the room's darkness into its lustrous realm, which appeared to extend beyond the boundaries of the visible and made the box before me look bottomless. But I felt the bottom for myself when the whispering voice of Mrs. Rinaldi instructed me to place the glass I was holding down into the box. So I offered the glass to that fluorescent mist, that churning vapor which was electrical in some way, scintillating with infinitesimal flashes of sharp light, sprinkled with shattered diamonds.

I expected to feel something as I put my hand in the shining box, easily setting the glass upon its shallow and quite solid bottom. But there was nothing at all to be felt, no sensation whatever—not even that of my own hand. There seemed to be a power to this prodigy, but it was a terribly quiescent power, a cataract of the purest light plummeting silently in the blackness of space. If it could have spoken it might have told, in a soft and reverberant voice, of the

lonely peace of the planets, the uninhabited paradise of clouds, and an antiseptic infinity.

After I placed the glass of wine and spittle into the box, the light from within took on a rosy hue for just a moment, then resumed its glittering whiteness once again. It had taken the offering. Mrs. Rinaldi whispered “Amen,” then carefully closed the lid upon the box, returning the room to blackness. I heard her replace the object in its tabernacle of storage, wherever that may have been. At last the lights came on.

“You can get up now,” Mrs. Rinaldi said. “And wipe off your knees, they're a little dirty.”

When I finished brushing off my pants I found that Mrs. Rinaldi was again scrutinizing me for telltale signs of some possible misunderstanding or perhaps misconduct that I might disclose to her. As far as I could tell, though, she saw nothing untoward in me. Then she said, “You will feel better now, but never try to guess what is in that box. Never seek to know more about it.” She did not pause to hear any response I might have had to her command, for she was indeed a wise woman and knew that in matters such as these no casual oath of abstention can be trusted, all fine intentions notwithstanding.

As soon as we left Mrs. Rinaldi's house, my mother asked me what had happened, and I described the ceremony in detail. Nevertheless, she remained at a loss for any simple estimate of what I had told her. While she no doubt expected that Mrs. Rinaldi's methods might be highly unusual, she also knew her own son's imagination. Still, she was obliged to keep faith with the arcane processes that she herself had set in motion. So after I recounted the incidents that took

place in that room, my mother only nodded silently, perhaps bewilderedly.

I should document that, for a certain period of time, my mother's faith in Mrs. Rinaldi did not appear to have been misplaced. The very day of our visit to the old woman was for me the beginning of a unique phase of experience. Even my father noted the change in my nighttime habits, as well as a newfound characterology I exhibited throughout the day. “The boy does seem quieter now,” he commented to my mother.

Indeed, I experienced a serenity of the most radical contrast to my former life, a placid solemnity in which I could feel myself atone for what I had once been. I slept straight through each night and barely ruffled my bedcovers. This is not to claim that my sleep was left completely untouched by dreams. But these were no more than ripples on great becalmed waters, pathetic gestures of something that was trying to bestir the immobility of a vast and colorless world. A few figures might appear, tremulous as smoke, but they were the merest invalids of hallucination, lacking the strength to speak or raise a hand against my terrible peace.

My daydreams were actually more interesting, while still being incredibly vague and without tension. Sitting quietly in the classroom at school, I often gazed out the window at clouds and sunlight, watching the way the sunlight penetrated the clouds and the way the clouds were filled with both sunlight and shadows. Yet no images or ideas were aroused by this sight, as they had been before. Only a vacant meditation took place, a musing without subject matter. I could feel something trying to emerge in my imagination, some wild and colorful drama that was being kept far away from me, as

far away as those clouds, remaining entirely vaporous and empty of either sense or sensation. And if I tried to draw anything in my notebook as I sat at my desk, allowing my hand all possible freedom (in order to find out if it could recall the world I had once inhabited, and even cherished), I found myself sketching over and over the same thing: boxes, boxes, boxes.

Nonetheless, I cannot say that I was unhappy during this time. My nightmares and everything associated with them had been bled from my system, drained away as I slept. I had been purified of tainted substances, sponged clean of strangely tinted stains on my mind and soul. I felt the vapid joy of a lightened being, a kind of clarity which seemed in a way true and virtuous. But this moratorium on every form of darkness could only last so long before the old impulses asserted themselves within me, moving out like a pack of famished wolves in search of the stuff that once fed them and would feed them again.

For so many nights my dreams remained anemic and continued to present only the palest characters and scenes. Thus, they had been rendered too weak to use me as they had before, seizing, as they did, the contents of my life—my memories and emotions, all the paraphernalia of a private history—and working them in their way, giving form to things that had none of their own and thereby exhausting my body and soul. Mrs. Rinaldi's theory of these parasites that have been called dreams was therefore accurate… as far as it went. But she had failed to consider, or perhaps refused to acknowledge, that the dreamer on his part draws something from the dream, gaining a store of experience otherwise impossible to obtain, hoarding grotesque or banal enig-

mas of the night to try and fill out the great empty spaces of the day. And my dreams had ceased to perform this function, or at least were no longer adequate to my needs—that appetite I had discovered in myself for banqueting on the absurd and horrible, even the perfectly evil. It was this deprivation, I believe, which brought about the change in the nature of my dreaming.

Having such paltry sustenance on which to nourish my tastes—frail demons and insipid decors—I must have been thrown back upon my own consciousness... until finally I became fully aware of my dreaming state, an intensely lucid spelunker in the caves of sleep. Over the course of several nights, then, I noticed a new or formerly obscure phenomenon, something that existed in the distance of those bankrupt landscapes that I had started to explore. It was a kind of sickly mist that lingered about the horizon of each dream, exerting a definite magnetism, a tugging upon the austere scenes that it enveloped from all sides, hovering high above like an animate sky, a celestial vault that glistened softly. Yet the dreams themselves were cast in the dullest tones and contained the most spare and dilapidated furnishings.

In the very last dream I had of this type, I was wandering amid a few widely scattered ruins that seemed to have arisen from some undersea abyss, all soft and pallid from their dark confinement. Like the settings of the other dreams, this one seemed familiar, though incomplete, as if I was seeing the decayed remnants of something I might have known in waking life. For those were *not* time-eaten towers rising around me, and at my feet there were not sunken strongboxes crumbling like rotten flesh. Instead, these objects

were the cabinets and cases I remembered from that room in Mrs. Rinaldi's house, except now this memory was degenerating, being dragged away little by little, digested by that mist which surrounded everything and nibbled at it. And the more closely I approached this mist, the more decomposed the scenery of the dream became, until it was consumed altogether and I could see nothing but that sparkling, swirling vapor.

It was only when I had entered this foggy void that the true sense of the dream, the inherent dread of my visions, was restored to me. Here was a sort of reservoir into which the depths of my dreams were being directed, leaving only a shallow spillover that barely trickled through my nights. *Here*, I say, without knowing really what place or plane of being it was: some spectral venue, a vacant lot situated along the backstreet of sleep, an outpost of the universe itself... or perhaps merely the inside of a box hidden away in the house of an old woman, a box in which something existed in all its insensible purity, a cloudy ether free of tainted forms and knowledge, freely cleansing others with its sterile grace.

In any event, I sensed that the usual boundaries of my world of sleep had extended into another realm. And it was here, I found, that the lost dreams were fully alive *in their essence*. Consumed within that barren vapor which I had seen imbibe a mixture of my own saliva and the reddest wine, they lived in exile from the multitude of unwitting hosts whose experiences they had once used like a wardrobe for those eerie performances behind the curtain of sleep. These were the parasites which forced the sleeper into the dual role of both player and witness in the manipulations of his memories and his emotions, the ungranted abduction of his

private history for those reckless revels called dreams. But here, in that prison of glittering purity, they had been reduced to their primordial state—dreams in abstraction, faceless and formless things from the old time that a very old woman had revealed to me. And although they had neither face nor form, none of the multitudinous disguises in which I had always known them, their presence was still quite palpable all around me, bearing down upon the richly laden lucidity I had brought with me into a place where I did not belong.

A struggle evolved as that angelic mist—agent of my salvation—held at bay the things that craved my mind and soul, my very consciousness. But rather than join in that struggle, I gave myself up to this ravenous siege, offering my awareness to what had none of its own, bestowing all the treasures of my life on this wasteland of abstractions.

Then the infinite whiteness itself was flooded with the colors of countless faces and forms, a blank sky became suddenly dense with convulsive rainbows, until *everything* was saturated with dark reveling and thick with frenzy in an utter blackness—the mindless night of the old time. And in the blackness I awoke, screaming for all the world.

The next day I was standing on Mrs. Rinaldi's porch, watching as my mother repeatedly slammed the doorknocker without being able to summon the old woman. But something told us she was nevertheless at home, a shadow that we saw pass nervously behind the front window. At last the door opened for us, but whoever opened it stayed on the other side, saying: “Missus, take your child home. There is nothing more that can be done. I made a mistake with him.”

My mother protested the recurrence of my "sickness," taking a step inside the house and pulling me along with her. But Mrs. Rinaldi only said: "Do not come in here. It is not a fit place to visit, and I am not fit to be looked upon." From what I could observe of the parlor, it did seem that an essential change had occurred, as if the room's fragile balance had failed and the ever-threatening derangement of its order had finally been consummated. Everything in this interior seemed askew, distorted by some process of decay and twisted out of natural proportion. It was a room seen through a warped and strangely colored window.

And how much stranger this color appeared when Mrs. Rinaldi suddenly showed herself, and I saw that her once-pale eyes and sallow face had taken on the same tint, a greenish glaze as of something both rotten and reptilian. My mother was immediately silenced by this sight. "Now will you leave me?" she said. "Even for myself there is nothing I can do any longer. You know what I am saying, child. All those years the dreams had been kept away. But you have *consorted* with them, I know you did. I have made a mistake with you. You let my angel be poisoned by the dreams which you could not deny. It *was* an angel, did you know that? It was pure of all thinking and pure of all dreaming. And you are the one who made it think and dream, and now it is dying. And it is dying not as an angel, but as a demon. Do you want to see what it is like now?" she said, gesturing toward a door that led into the cellar of her house. "Yes, it is down there because it is not the way it was and could not remain where it was. It crawled away with its own body, the body of a demon. And it has its own dreams, the dreams of a demon.

It is dreaming and dying of its dreams. And I am dying too, because all the dreams have come back."

Mrs. Rinaldi then began to approach me, and the color of her eyes and face seemed to deepen. That was when my mother grasped my arm to pull me quickly from the house. As we ran off I looked over my shoulder and saw the old woman raving in the open doorway, cursing me for a demon.

It was not long afterward that we learned of Mrs. Rinaldi's death. True to her own diagnosis, the parasites were upon her, although local gossip told that she had been suffering for years from a cancer of some kind. There was also evidence that another inhabitant of the house survived the old woman for a short time. As it happened, several of my schoolmates reported to me their investigations after dark at the house of the "old witch," a place where I myself was forbidden by my parents to go. So I cannot claim that I observed with my own eyes what crept along the floor of that moonlit house. "Like a pile of filthy rags," said one boy.

But I did dream about this prodigy. I even dreamed about its dreams as they dragged every shining angelic particle of this being into the night of the old time. Then all my bad dreams abated after a while, just as they always had and always would, using my world only at intervals and gradually dissolving my life into theirs.

Mrs Rinaldi's Angel (1994 Noctuary Version)

First published in *A Whisper Of Blood*, November 1991

From time to time during my childhood, the striking dreams that I nightly experienced would become brutally vivid, causing me to awake screaming. The shouting done, I sank back into my bed in a state of super-enervation resulting from the bodiless adventures imposed upon my slumbering self. Yet my body was surely affected by this nocturnal regimen, exercised harshly by visions both crystalline and confused. This activity, however immaterial, only served to drain my reserves of strength and in a few moments stole from me the benefits of a full night's sleep. Nevertheless, while I was deprived of the privilege of a natural rest, there may also have been some profit gained: the awful opulence of the dream, a rich and swollen world nourished by the exhaustion of the flesh. The world, in fact, as such. Any other realm seemed an absence by comparison, at best a chasm in the fertile graveyard of life.

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"Tomorrow your father is leaving early on business. You stay home from school, and then we'll go and visit a woman I know."

Late the following morning, my mother and I went to a house in one of the outlying neighborhoods of town and were graciously invited to be seated in the parlor of the long-widowed Mrs Rinaldi. Perhaps it was only the fatigue my dreams had inflicted on me that made it so difficult to consolidate any lucid thoughts or feelings about the old woman and her remote house. Although the well-ordered room we occupied was flush with sunlight, this illumination somehow acted in the way of a wash over a watercolor painting, blurring the outline of things and subduing the clarity of surfaces. This obscurity was not dispersed even by the large and thickly shaded lamp Mrs Rinaldi kept lighted beside the small divan on which she and my mother sat. I was close to them in an old but respectably upholstered armchair, and yet their forms refused to come into focus, just as everything else in that room resisted definition. How well I knew such surroundings, those deep interiors of dream where everything is saturated with unreality and more or less dis-

solves under a direct gaze. I could tell how neatly this particular interior was arranged—pictures perfectly straight and tight against the walls, well-dusted figurines arranged along open shelves, lace-fringed tablecovers set precisely in place, and delicate silk flowers in slim vases of colored glass. Yet there was something so fragile about the balance of these things, as if they were all susceptible to sudden derangement should there be some upset, no matter how subtle, in the secret system which held them together. This volatility seemed to extend to Mrs Rinaldi herself, though in fact she may have been its source.

Casually examined, she appeared to present only the usual mysteries of old women who might be expected to speak with a heavy accent, whether or not they actually did so. She wore the carnal bulk and simple attire of a peasant race, and her calm manner indeed epitomized the peasant quietude of popular conception: her hands folded without tremor upon a wide lap and her eyes mildly attentive. But those eyes were so pale, as was her complexion and gauzy hair. It was as if some great strain had depleted her, and was continually depleting her, of the strong coloring she once possessed, draining her powers and leaving her vulnerable to some tenuous onslaught. At any moment during the time my mother was explaining the reason why we sought her help, Mrs Rinaldi might have degenerated before our eyes, might have finally succumbed to spectral afflictions she had spent so many years fending off, both for her own sake and for the sake of others. And still she might have easily been mistaken for just another old woman whose tidy parlor displayed no object or image that would betray her most questionable and perilous occupation.

“Missus,” she said to my mother, though her eyes were on me, “I would like to take your son into another room in this house. There I believe I may begin to help him.”

My mother assented and Mrs Rinaldi escorted me down a hallway to a room at the back of the house. The room reminded me of a little shop of some kind, one that kept its merchandise hidden in dark cabinets along the walls, in great chests upon the floor, boxes and cases of every sort piled here and there. Nothing except these receptacles, this array of multiform exteriors, was exposed to view. The only window was tightly shuttered and a bare light bulb hanging overhead served as the only illumination.

There was nowhere to sit, only empty floor space; Mrs Rinaldi took my hand and stood me at the center of the room. After gazing rather sternly down at me for some moments, she proceeded to pace slowly around me.

“Do you know what dreams are?” she asked quietly, and then immediately began to answer her own question. “They are parasites—maggots of the mind and soul, feeding on the mind and soul as ordinary maggots feed on the body. And their feeding on the mind and soul in turn gnaws away at the body, which in turn again affects the mind and the soul, and so on until death. These things cannot be separated, nor can anything else. Because everything is terribly inseparable and affects every other thing. Even the most alien things are connected together with every other thing. And so if these dreams have no world of their own to nourish them, they may come into yours and possess it, exhaust it little by little each night. They use your world and use it up. They wear your face and the faces of things you know: things that are yours they use in ways that are theirs. And some persons are

so easy for them to use, and they use them so hard. But they use everyone and have always used everyone, because they are from the old time, the time before all the worlds awoke from a long and helpless night. And these dreams, these things that are called dreams, are still working to throw us back into that great mad darkness, to exhaust each one of us in our lonely sleep and to use up everyone until death. Little by little, night after night, they take us away from ourselves and from the truth of things. I myself know very well what this can be like and what the dreams can do to us. They make us dance to their strange illusions until we are too exhausted to live. And they have found in you, child, an easy partner for their horrible dancing."

With these words Mrs Rinaldi not only revealed a side of herself quite different from the serene wise woman my mother had seen, but she also took me much deeper into things I had merely suspected until that day in the room where chests and strange boxes were piled up everywhere and great cabinets loomed along the walls, so many tightly closed doors and drawers and locked-up lids with so many things on the other side of them.

"Of course," she went on, "these dreams of yours cannot be wholly exorcised from your life, but only driven back so that they may do no extraordinary harm. They will still triumph in the end, denying us not just the restoration of nightly sleep. For ultimately they steal away the time which might have measured into immortality. They corrupt us in every way, abducting us from the ranks of angels we might have been or become, pure and calm and everlasting. It is because of them that we endure such a meager allotment of years, with all their foulness. This is all I can offer you,

child, even if you may not understand what it means. For it is surely not meant that you should fall into the fullest corruption before your time."

Her speech concluded, Mrs Rinaldi stood before me, massive and motionless, her breathing now a bit labored. I confess that her theories intrigued me as far as I could comprehend them, for at the time her statements regarding the meaning and mechanisms of dream appeared to be founded on somewhat questionable assumptions, unnecessarily outlandish in their departures from the oldest orthodoxies of creation. Nonetheless, I decided not to resist whatever applications she chose to make of her ideas. On her side, she was scrutinizing my small form with some intensity, engaged in what seemed a psychic sizing up of my presence, as if she was seriously unsure whether or not it was safe to move on to the next step with me.

Apparently resolving her doubts, she shuffled over to a tall cabinet, unlocked its door with a key she had taken from a sagging pocket in her dress, and from within removed two items: a slim decanter half-filled with a dark red liquid, presumably wine, and a shallow wide-mouthed drinking glass. Carrying these objects back to me, she put out her right hand, in which she held the glass, and said: "Take this and spit into it." After I had done this, she poured some of the wine into the glass and then replaced the decanter in its cabinet, which she locked once again. "Now kneel down on the floor," she ordered. "Don't let anything spill out of the glass, and don't get up until I tell you to do so. I'm going to turn out the light."

Even in total darkness, Mrs Rinaldi maneuvered well about the room, her footsteps again moving away from me. I

heard her opening another cabinet, or perhaps it was a large chest whose heavy lid she struggled to push back, its hinges grinding in the darkness. A slight draft crossed the room, a brief drifting current of air without scent and neither warm nor cold. Mrs Rinaldi then approached me, moving more slowly than she had before, as if bearing some weighty object. With a groan, she set it down, and I heard it scrape the floor inches from where I knelt, though I could not see what it was.

Suddenly a thin line of light scored the blackness, and I could see Mrs Rinaldi's old finger slowly lifting the lid of a long low box from which the luminousness emanated. The glowing slit widened as the lid was drawn back farther, revealing a pale brilliance that seemed confined wholly within the box itself, casting not the least glimmer into the room. The source of this light was a kind of incandescent vapor that curled about in a way that seemed to draw the room's darkness into its lustrous realm, which appeared to extend beyond the boundaries of the visible and made the box before me look bottomless. But I felt the bottom for myself when the whispering voice of Mrs Rinaldi instructed me to place the glass I was holding down into the box. So I offered the glass to that fluorescent mist, that churning vapor which was electrical in some way, scintillating with infinitesimal flashes of sharp light, sprinkled with shattered diamonds.

I expected to feel something as I put my hand in the shining box, easily setting the glass upon its shallow and quite solid bottom. But there was nothing at all to be felt, no sensation whatever—not even that of my own hand. There seemed to be a power to this prodigy, but it was a terribly quiescent power, a cataract of the purest light plummeting

silently in the blackness of space. If it could have spoken it might have told, in a soft and reverberant voice, of the lonely peace of the planets, the uninhabited paradise of clouds, and an antiseptic infinity.

After I placed the glass of wine and spittle into the box, the light from within took on a rosy hue for just a moment, then resumed its glittering whiteness once again. It had taken the offering. Mrs Rinaldi whispered “amen,” then carefully closed the lid upon the box, returning the room to blackness. I heard her replace the object in its tabernacle of storage, wherever that may have been. At last the lights came on.

“You can get up now,” Mrs Rinaldi said. “And wipe off your knees, they're a little dirty.”

When I finished brushing off my pants I found that Mrs Rinaldi was again scrutinizing me for tell-tale signs of some possible misunderstanding or perhaps misconduct that I might disclose to her. I imagined that she was about to say, “Do not ask what it was you saw in this room.” But in actuality she said, “You will feel better now, but never try to guess what is in that box. Never seek to know more about it.” She did not pause to hear any response I might have had to her command, for she was indeed a wise woman and knew that in matters such as these no casual oath of abstention can be trusted, all fine intentions notwithstanding.

As soon as we left Mrs Rinaldi's house, my mother asked me what had happened, and I described the ceremony in detail. Nevertheless, she remained at a loss for any simple estimate of what I had told her: while she expected that Mrs Rinaldi's methods might be highly unusual, she also knew her own son's imagination. Still, she was obliged to keep

faith with the arcane processes that she herself had set in motion. So after I recounted the incidents that took place in that room, my mother only nodded silently, perhaps bewilderedly.

I should document that, for a certain period of time, my mother's faith in Mrs Rinaldi did not appear to have been misplaced. The very day of our visit to the old woman was for me the beginning of a unique phase of experience. Even my father noted the change in my nighttime habits, as well as a newfound characterology I exhibited throughout the day.

"The boy does seem quieter now," he commented to my mother.

Indeed, I could feel myself approaching a serenity almost shameful in its expansiveness, one that submerged me in a placid routine of the most violent contrast to my former life. I slept straight through each night and barely ruffled my bedcovers. This is not to claim that my sleep was left completely untouched by dreams. But these were no more than ripples on great becalmed waters, pathetic gestures of something that was trying to bestir the immobility of a vast and colorless world. A few figures might appear, tremulous as smoke, but they were the merest invalids of hallucination, lacking the strength to speak or raise a hand against my terrible peace.

My daydreams were actually more interesting, while still being incredibly vague and without tension. Sitting quietly in the classroom at school, I often gazed out the window at clouds and sunlight, watching the way the sunlight penetrated the clouds and the way the clouds were filled with both sunlight and shadows. Yet no images or ideas were aroused

by this sight, as they had been before. Only a vacant meditation took place, a musing without subject matter. I could feel something trying to emerge in my imagination, some wild and colorful drama that was being kept far away from me, as far away as those clouds, remaining entirely vaporous and empty of either sense or sensation. And if I tried to draw any pictures in my notebook, allowing my hand all possible freedom (in order to find out if it could feel and remember what I could not), I found myself sketching over and over the same thing: boxes, boxes, boxes.

Nonetheless, I cannot say that I was unhappy during this time. My nightmares and everything associated with them had been bled from my system, drained away as I slept. I had been purified of tainted substances, sponged clean of strangely tinted stains on my mind and soul. I felt the vapid joy of a lightened being, a kind of clarity which seemed in a way true and even virtuous. But this moratorium on every form of darkness could only last so long before the old impulses asserted themselves within me, moving out like a pack of famished wolves in search of the stuff that once fed them and would feed them again.

For a number of nights my dreams remained somewhat anemic and continued to present only the palest characters and scenes. Thus, they had been rendered too weak to use me as they had before, seizing, as they did, the contents of my life—my memories and emotions, all the paraphernalia of a private history—and working them in their way, giving form to things that had none of their own and thereby exhausting my body and soul. Mrs Rinaldi's theory of these parasites that have been called dreams was therefore accurate... as far as it went. But she had failed to consider, or per-

haps refused to acknowledge, that the dreamer on his part draws something from the dream, gaining a store of experience otherwise impossible to obtain, hoarding the grotesque or banal enigmas of the night to try and fill out the great empty spaces of the day. And my dreams had ceased to perform this function, or at least were no longer adequate to my needs—that appetite I had discovered in myself for banqueting on the absurd and horrible, even the perfectly evil. It was this deprivation, I believe, which brought about the change in the nature of my dreaming.

Having such paltry sustenance on which to nourish my tastes—frail demons and insipid decors—I must have been thrown back upon my own consciousness... until finally I became fully aware of my dreaming state, an intensely lucid spelunker in the caves of sleep. Over the course of several nights, then, I noticed a new or formerly obscure phenomenon, something that existed in the distance of those bankrupt landscapes that I had started to explore. It was a kind of sickly mist that lingered about the horizon of each dream, exerting a definite magnetism, a tugging upon the austere scenes that it enveloped from all sides, even hovering high above like an animate sky, a celestial vault that glistened softly. Yet the dreams themselves were cast in the dullest tones and contained the most spare and dilapidated furnishings.

In the very last dream I had of this type, I was wandering amid a few widely scattered ruins that seemed to have arisen from some undersea abyss, all soft and pallid from their dark confinement. Like the settings of the other dreams, this one seemed familiar, though incomplete, as if I was seeing the decayed remnants of something I might have known in

waking life. For those were not time-eaten towers rising around,me, and at my feet there were not sunken strong-boxes crumbling like rotten flesh. Instead, these objects were the cabinets and cases I remembered from that room in Mrs Rinaldi's house, except now this memory was degenerating, being dragged away little by little, digested by that mist which surrounded everything and nibbled at it. And the more closely I approached this mist, the more decomposed the scenery of the dream became, until it was consumed altogether and I could see nothing but that sparkling, swirling vapor.

It was only when I had entered this foggy void that the true sense of dream, the inherent dread of my visions, was restored to me. Here was a sort of reservoir into which the depths of my dreams were being directed, leaving only a shallow spillover that barely trickled through my nights. Here, I say, without knowing really what place or plane of being it was: some spectral venue, a vacant lot situated along the backstreet of sleep, an outpost of the universe itself... or perhaps merely the inside of a box hidden away in the house of an old woman, a box in which something existed in all its insensible purity, a cloudy ether free of tainted forms and knowledge, freely cleansing others with its sterile grace.

In any event, I sensed that the usual boundaries of my world of sleep had extended into another realm. And it was here, I found, that the lost dreams were fully alive in their essence. Consumed within that barren vapor which I had seen imbibe a mixture of my own saliva and the reddest wine, they lived in exile from the multitude of unwitting hosts whose experiences they had once used like a wardrobe for those eerie performances behind the curtain of sleep.

These were the parasites which forced the sleeper into the dual role of both player and witness in the manipulations of his memories and his emotions, the ungranted abduction of his private history for those wreckless revels called dreams. But here, in that prison of glittering purity, they had been reduced to their primordial state—dreams in abstraction, faceless and formless things from the old time that a very old woman had revealed to me. And although they had neither face nor form, none of the multitudinous disguises in which I had always known them, their presence was still quite palpable all around me, bearing down upon the richly laden lucidity I had brought with me into a place where I did not belong.

A struggle evolved as that angelic mist—agent of my salvation—held at bay the things that craved my mind and soul, my very consciousness. But rather than join in that struggle, I gave myself up to this ravenous siege, offering my awareness to what had none of its own, bestowing all the treasures of my life on this wasteland of abstractions.

Then the infinite whiteness itself was flooded with the colors of countless faces and forms, a blank sky suddenly dense with rainbows, until everything was so saturated with revels and thick with frenzy that it took on the utter blackness of the old time. And in the blackness I awoke, screaming for all the world.

The next day I was standing on Mrs Rinaldi's porch, watching as my mother repeatedly slammed the doorknocker without being able to summon the old woman. But something told us she was nevertheless at home, a shadow that we saw pass nervously behind the front window. At last the door opened for us, but whoever opened it

stayed on the other side, saying: “Missus, take your child home. There is nothing more that can be done. I made a mistake with him.”

My mother protested the recurrence of my “sickness”, taking a step inside the house and pulling me along with her. But Mrs Rinaldi only said: “Do not come in here. It is not a fit place to visit, and I am not fit to be looked upon.”

From what I could observe of the parlor, it did seem that an essential change had occurred, as if the room's fragile balance had failed and the ever-threatening derangement of its order had finally been consummated. Everything in this interior seemed askew, distorted by some process of decay and twisted out of natural proportion. It was a room seen through a warped and strangely colored window.

And how much stranger this color appeared when Mrs Rinaldi suddenly showed herself, and I saw that her once-pale eyes and sallow face had taken on the same tint, a greenish glaze as of something both rotten and reptilian. My mother was immediately silenced by this sight.

“Now will you leave me?” she said. “Even for myself there is nothing I can do any longer. You know what I am saying, child. All those years the dreams had been kept away. But you have consorted with them, I know you did. I have made a mistake with you. You let my angel be poisoned by the dreams which you could not deny. It was an angel, did you know that? It was pure of all thinking and pure of all dreaming. And you are the one who made it think and dream and now it is dying. And it is dying not as an angel, but as a demon. Do you want to see what it is like now?” she said, gesturing toward a door that led into the cellar of her house. “Yes, it is down there because it is not the way it was

and could not remain where it was. It crawled away with its own body, the body of a demon. And it has its own dreams, the dreams of a demon. It is dreaming and dying of its dreams. And I am dying too, because all the dreams have come back."

Mrs Rinaldi then began to approach me, and the color of her eyes and her face seemed to deepen. That was when my mother grasped my arm to pull me quickly from the house. As we ran off I looked over my shoulder and saw the old woman raving in the open doorway, cursing me for a demon.

It was not long afterward that we learned of Mrs Rinaldi's death. True to her own diagnosis, the parasites were upon her, although local gossip told that she had been suffering for years from a cancer of some kind. There was also evidence that another inhabitant of the house survived the old woman for a short time. As it happened, several of my schoolmates reported to me their investigations after dark at the house of the "old witch", a place where I myself was forbidden by my parents to go. So I cannot claim that I observed with my own eyes what crept along the floor of that moonlit house, "like a pile of filthy rags," said one boy.

But I did dream about this prodigy; I even dreamed about its dreams as they dragged every shining angelic particle of this being into the blackness of the old time. Then all my bad dreams abated after a while, just as they always had and always would, using my world only at intervals and gradually dissolving my life into theirs.

Nethescurial (2011 Grimscribe Version)

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The Idol and the Island

I have uncovered a rather wonderful manuscript, *the letter began*. It was an entirely fortuitous find, made during my day's dreary labors among some of the older and more decomposed remains entombed in the library archives. If I am any judge of antique documents, and of course I am, these brittle pages date back to the closing decades of the last century. (A more precise estimate of age will follow, along with a photocopy which I fear will not do justice to the delicate, crinkly script, nor to the greenish black discoloration the ink has taken on over the years.) Unfortunately there is no indication of authorship either within the manuscript itself or in the numerous and tedious papers whose company it has been keeping, none of which seem related to the item under discussion. And what an item it is—a real storybook stranger in a crowd of documentary types, and probably destined to remain unknown.

I am almost certain that this invention, though at times it seems to pose as a letter or journal entry, has never appeared in common print. Given the bizarre nature of its content, I would surely have known of it before now. Although it is an untitled "statement" of sorts, the opening lines were more than enough to cause me to put everything else aside and se-

clude myself in a corner of the library stacks for the rest of the afternoon.

So it begins: “Amid the rooms of our houses and beyond their walls—beneath dark waters and across moonlit skies—below earth mound and above mountain peak—in northern leaf and southern flower—inside each star and the voids between them—within blood and bone—throughout all souls and spirits—upon the watchful winds of this and the several worlds—behind the faces of the living and the dead…” And there it trails off, a quoted fragment of some more ancient text. But this is certainly not the last we will hear of this rambling refrain!

As it happens, the above string of phrases is cited by the narrator in reference to a certain *presence*, more properly an omnipresence, which he encounters on an obscure island located at some unspecified northern latitude. Briefly, he has been summoned to this island, which appears on a local map under the name of Nethescurial, in order to rendezvous with another man, an archaeologist who is designated only as Dr. N—and who will come to know the narrator of the manuscript by the self-admitted alias of “Bartholomew Gray.”

Dr. N—, it seems, has been occupying himself upon that barren, remote, and otherwise uninhabited isle with some peculiar antiquarian rummagings. As Mr. Gray sails toward the island he observes the murky skies above him and the murky waters below. His prose style is somewhat plain for my taste, but it serves well enough once he approaches the island and takes surprisingly scrupulous notice of its eerie aspect: contorted rock formations; pointed pines and spruces of gigantic stature and uncanny movements; the

masklike countenance of sea-facing cliffs; and a sickly, stagnant fog clinging to the landscape like a fungus.

From the moment Mr. Gray begins describing the island, a sudden glamour enters into his account—that sinister enchantment which derives from a profound evil that is kept at just the right distance from us so that we may experience both our love and our fear of it in one sweeping sensation. Too close and we may be reminded of an omnipresent evil in the living world, and threatened with having our sleeping sense of doom awakened into full vigor. Too far away and we become even more incurious and complacent than is our usual state, and ultimately exasperated when an imaginary evil is so poorly evoked that it fails to offer the faintest echo of its real and all-pervasive counterpart. Of course, any number of locales may serve as the setting to reveal ominous truths; evil, beloved and menacing evil, may show itself anywhere precisely because it is everywhere and is as stunningly set off by a foil of sunshine and flowers as it is by darkness and dead leaves. A purely private quirk, nevertheless, sometimes allows the purest essence of life's malignity to be aroused only by sites such as the lonely island of Nethescurial, where the real and the unreal swirl freely and madly about in the same fog.

It seems that in this place, this far-flung realm, Dr. N— has discovered an ancient and long-sought artifact, a marginal but astonishing entry in that unspeakably voluminous journal of creation. Soon after landfall, Mr. Gray finds himself verifying the truth of the archaeologist's claims: that the island has been strangely molded in all its parts, and within its shores every manifestation of plant or mineral or anything whatever appears to have fallen at the mercy of some

shaping force of demonic temperament, a genius loci which has sculpted its nightmares out of the atoms of the local earth. Closer inspection of this insular spot on the map serves to deepen the sense of evil enchantment that had been lightly sketched earlier in the manuscript. But I refrain from further quotation (it is getting late and I want to wrap up this letter before bedtime) in order to cut straight through the epidermis of this tale and penetrate to its very bones and viscera. Indeed, the manuscript does seem to have an anatomy of its own, its dark green holography rippling over it like veins, and I regret that my paraphrase may not deliver it alive. Enough!

Mr. Gray makes his way inland, lugging along with him a fat little traveling bag. In a clearing he comes upon a large but unadorned, almost primitive house which stands against the backdrop of the island's wartlike hills and tumorous trees. The outside of the house is encrusted with the motley and leprous stones so abundant in the surrounding landscape. The inside of the house, which the visitor sees upon opening the unlocked door, is spacious as a cathedral but far less ornamented. The walls are white and smoothly surfaced; they also seem to taper inward, pyramid-like, as they rise from floor to lofty ceiling. There are no windows, and numerous oil lamps scattered about fill the interior of the house with a sacral glow. A figure descends a long staircase, crosses the great distance of the room, and solemnly greets his guest. At first wary of each other, they eventually achieve a degree of mutual ease and finally get down to their true business.

Thus far one can see that the drama enacted is a familiar one: the stage is rigidly traditional and the performers upon

it are caught up in its style. For these actors are not so much people as they are puppets from the old shows, the ones that have told the same story for centuries, the ones that can still be very strange to us. Traipsing through the same old foggy scene, seeking the same old isolated house, the puppets in these plays always find everything new and unknown, because they have no memories to speak of and can hardly recall making these stilted motions countless times in the past. They struggle through the same gestures, repeat the same lines, although in rare moments they may feel a dim suspicion that this has all happened before. How like they are to the human race itself! This is what makes them our perfect representatives—this and the fact that they are hand carved in the image of maniacal victims who seek to share the secrets of their individual torments as their strings are manipulated by the same master.

The secrets which these two Punchinellos share are rather deviously presented by the author of this confession (for upon consideration this is the genre to which it truly belongs). Indeed, Mr. Gray, or whatever his name might be, appears to know much more than he is telling, especially with respect to his colleague the archaeologist.
Nevertheless, he records what Dr. N—knows and, more importantly, what this avid excavator has found buried on the island. The thing is only a fragment of an object dating from antiquity. Known to be part of a religious idol, it is difficult to say which part. It is a twisted piece of a puzzle, one suggesting that the figure as a whole is wickedly repulsive in its design. The fragment is also darkened with the verdigris of centuries, causing its substance to resemble something like decomposing jade.

And were the other pieces of this idol also to be found on the same island? The answer is no. The idol seems to have been shattered ages ago, and each broken part of it buried in some remote place so that its entirety might not easily be joined together again. Although it was a mere representation, the effigy itself was the focus of a great power. The members of the ancient sect which was formed to worship this power seem to have been pantheists of a sort, believing that all created things—appearances to the contrary—are of a single, unified, and transcendent *stuff*, an emanation of a central creative force. Hence the ritual chant which runs "amid the rooms of our houses," et cetera, and alludes to the all-present nature of this deity—a most primal and pervasive type of god, one that falls into the category of "gods who eclipse all others," territorialist divinities whose claim to the creation purportedly supersedes that of their rivals. (The words of the famous chant, by the way, are the only ones to come down to us from the ancient cult and appeared for the first time in an ethnographical, quasi-esoteric work entitled *Illuminations of the Ancient World*, which was published in the latter part of the nineteenth century, around the same time, I would guess, as this manuscript I am rushing to summarize was written.) At some point in their career as worshipers of the "Great One God," a shadow fell upon the sect. It appears that one day it was revealed to them, in a manner both obscure and hideous, that the power to which they bowed was essentially evil in character and that their religious mode of pantheism was in truth a kind of *pandemonism*. But this revelation was not a surprise to all of the sectarians, since there seems to have been an internecine struggle which ended in slaughter. In any case, the anti-de-

monists prevailed, and they immediately rechristened their ex-deity to reflect its newly discovered essence in evil. And the name by which they henceforth called it was Nethescurial.

A nice turn of affairs: this obscure island openly advertises itself as the home of the idol of Nethescurial. Of course, the island is only one of several to which the pieces of the vandalized totem were scattered. The original members of the sect who had treacherously turned against their god knew that the power concentrated in the effigy could not be destroyed, and so they decided to parcel it out to isolated corners of the earth where it could do the least harm. But would they have brought attention to this fact by allowing these widely disseminated burial plots to bear the name of the pandemoniacal god? This is doubtful, just as it is equally unlikely that it was they who built those crude houses, temples of a fashion, to mark the spot where a particular shard of the old idol might be located by others.

Thus, Dr. N—is forced to postulate a survival of the demonist faction of the sect, a cult that had devoted itself to searching out those places which had been transformed by the presence of the idol and might thus be known by their gruesome features. This quest would require a great deal of time and effort for its completion, given the global reaches where those splinters of evil might be tucked away. Known as the "seeking," it also involved the enlistment of outsiders, who in latter days were often researchers into the ways of bygone cultures, though they remained ignorant that the cause they served was still a living one. Dr. N—therefore warns his "colleague, Mr. Gray," that they may be in danger from those who carried on the effort to reassemble the idol

and revive its power. The very presence of that great and crude house on the island certainly proved that the cult was already aware of the location of *this* fragment of the idol. In fact, the mysterious Mr. Gray, not unexpectedly, is actually a member of the cult in its modern incarnation; furthermore, he has brought with him to the island—bulky traveling bag, you know—all the other pieces of the idol, which have been recovered through centuries of seeking. Now he only needs the one piece discovered by Dr. N—to make the idol whole again for the first time in a couple millennia.

But he also needs the archaeologist himself as a kind of sacrifice to Nethescurial, a ceremony which takes place later the same night in the upper part of the house. If I may telescope the ending for brevity's sake, the sacrificial ritual holds some horrific surprises for Mr. Gray (these people seem never to realize what they are getting themselves into), who soon repents of his evil practices and is driven to smash the idol to pieces once more. Making his escape from that weird island, he throws these pieces overboard, sowing the cold gray waters with the scraps of an incredible power. Later, fearing an obscure threat to his existence (perhaps the reprisal of his fellow cultists), he composes an account of a horror which is both his own and that of the whole human race.

End of manuscript. (*except for the concluding lines, which reveal the somewhat extravagant, but not entirely uninteresting, conclusion of the narrator himself.)

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Now, despite my penchant for such wild yarns as I have just attempted to describe, I am not oblivious to their short-

comings. For one thing, whatever emotional impact the narrative may have lost in the foregoing précis, it certainly gained in coherence. The incidents in the manuscript are clumsily developed; important details lack proper emphasis; and impossible things are thrown at the reader without any real effort at persuasion of their veracity. I do admire the fantastic principle at the core of this piece. The nature of that pandemoniac entity is very intriguing. Imagine all of creation as a mere mask for the foulest evil, an absolute evil whose reality is mitigated only by our blindness to it, an evil at the heart of things, existing "inside each star and the voids between them—within blood and bone—through all souls and spirits," and so forth. There is even a reference in the manuscript that suggests an analogy between Nethescurial and that beautiful myth of the Australian aborigines known as the Alchera (the Dreamtime, or Dreaming), a super-reality which is the source of all we see in the world around us. (And this reference will be useful in dating the manuscript, since it was toward the end of the last century that Australian anthropologists made the aboriginal cosmology known to the general public.) Imagine the universe as the dream, the feverish nightmare of a demonic demiurge. O Supreme Nethescurial!

The problem is that such supernatural inventions are indeed quite difficult to imagine. So often they fail to materialize in the mind, to take on a mental texture, and thus remain unfelt as anything but an abstract monster of metaphysics—an elegant or awkward schematic that cannot rise from the paper to touch us. Of course, we do need to keep a certain distance from such specters as Nethescurial, and this is usually secured through the medium of words as such, which

ensnare all kinds of menacing creatures before they can tear us body and soul. (And yet the words of this particular manuscript seem rather weak in this regard, possibly because they are only the drab green scratchings of a human hand and not the heavy mesh of black type.) But we do want to get close enough to feel the foul breath of these beasts, or to see them as prehistoric leviathans circling about the tiny island on which we have taken refuge. Even if we are incapable of a sincere belief in ancient cults and their unheard of idols, even if these pseudonymous adventurers and archaeologists appear to be mere shadows on a wall, and even if strange houses on remote islands are of shaky construction, there may still be a power in these things that threatens us like a bad dream. And this power emanates not so much from within the tale as it does from somewhere *behind* it, some place of infinite darkness and ubiquitous malignity in which we may walk unaware.

But never mind these night thoughts; it's only to bed that I will walk after closing this letter.

Postscript

Later the same night.

Several hours have passed since I set down the above description and analysis of that manuscript. How naive those words of mine now sound to me. And yet they are still true enough, from a certain perspective. But that perspective was a privileged one which, at least for the moment, I do not enjoy. The distance between me and a devastating evil has lessened considerably. I no longer find it so difficult to imagine the horrors delineated in that manuscript, for I have

known them in the most intimate way. What a fool I seem to myself for playing with such visions. How easily a simple dream can destroy one's sense of safety, if only for a few turbulent hours. Certainly I have experienced all this before, but never as acutely as tonight.

I had not been asleep for long but apparently long enough. At the start of the dream I was sitting at a desk in a very dark room. It also seemed to me that the room was very large, though I could see little of it beyond the area of the desktop, at either end of which glowed a lamp of some kind. Spread out before me were many papers varying in size. These I knew to be maps of one sort or another, and I was studying them each in turn. I had become quite absorbed in their chartings, which now dominated the dream to the exclusion of all other images. Each of them focused on some concatenation of islands without reference to larger, more familiar land masses. A powerful impression of remoteness and seclusion was conveyed by these irregular daubs of earth fixed in bodies of water that were unnamed. But although the location of the islands was not specific, somehow I was sure that those for whom the maps were meant already had this knowledge. Nevertheless, this secrecy was only superficial, for no esoteric key was required to seek out the greater geography of which these maps were an exaggerated detail: they were all distinguished by some known language in which the islands were named, different languages for different maps. Yet upon closer view (indeed, I felt as if I were actually journeying among those exotic fragments of land, tiny pieces of shattered mystery), I saw that every map had one thing in common: within each group of islands, whatever language was used to name them, there was always

one called Nethescurial. It was as if all over the world this terrible name had been insinuated into diverse locales as the only one suitable for a certain island. Of course there were variant cognate forms and spellings, sometimes transliterations, of the word. (How precisely I saw them!) Still, with the strange conviction that may overcome a dreamer, I knew these places had all been claimed in the name of Nethescurial and that they bore the unique sign of something which had been buried there—the pieces of that dismembered idol.

And with this thought, the dream reshaped itself. The maps dissolved into a kind of mist; the desk before me became something else, an altar of coarse stone, and the two lamps upon it flared up to reveal a strange object now positioned between them. So many visions in the dream were piercingly clear, but this dark object was not. My impression was that it was conglomerate in form, suggesting a monstrous whole. At the same time these outlines which alluded to both man and beast, flower and insect, reptiles, stones, and countless things I could not even name, all seemed to be changing, mingling in a thousand ways that prevented any sensible image of the idol.

With the upsurge in illumination offered by the lamps, I could see that the room was truly of unusual dimensions. The four enormous walls slanted toward one another and joined at a point high above the floor, giving the space around me the shape of a perfect pyramid. But I now saw things from an oddly remote perspective: the altar with its idol stood in the middle of the room and I was some distance away, or perhaps not even in the scene. Then, from a dark corner or secret door, there emerged a file of figures walking slowly toward the altar and finally congregating in a half-

circle before it. I could see that they were all quite skeletal in shape, for each of them was identically dressed in a black material which clung tightly to their bodies and made them look like skinny shadows. They seemed to be actually bound in blackness from head to foot, with only their faces exposed. But they were not, in fact, faces—they were pale, expressionless, and identical masks. The masks were without openings and bestowed upon their wearers a terrible anonymity, an ancient anonymity. Behind these smooth and barely contoured faces were spirits beyond all hope or consolation except in the evil to which they would willingly abandon themselves. Yet this abandonment was a highly selective process, a ceremony of the chosen.

One of the white-faced shadows stepped forward from the group, seemingly drawn forth into the proximity of the idol. The figure stood motionless, while from within its dark body something began to drift out like luminous smoke. It floated, swirling gently, toward the idol and there was absorbed. And I knew—for was this not my own dream?—that the idol and its sacrifice were becoming one within each other. This spectacle continued until nothing of the glowing, ectoplasmic haze remained to be extracted, and the figure—now shrunken to the size of a marionette—collapsed. But soon it was being lifted, rather tenderly, by another from the group who placed the dwarfish form upon the altar and, taking up a knife, carved deep into the body, making no sound. Then something oozed upon the altar, something thick and oily and strangely colored, darkly colored though not with any of the shades of blood. Although the strangeness of this color was more an idea than a matter of vision, it began to

fill the dream and to determine the final stage of its development.

Quite abruptly, that closed, cavernous room dissolved into a stretch of land that was cluttered with a bric-a-brac topography whose crazed shapes were of that single and sinister color, as if everything were covered with an ancient, darkened mold. It was a landscape that might once have been of stone and earth and trees (such was my impression) but had been transformed entirely into something like petrified lichen. Spreading before me, twisting in the way of wrought iron tracery or great overgrown gardens of writhing coral, was an intricate latticework whose surface was overrun with a chaos of little carvings, scabby designs that suggested a world of demonic faces and forms. And their complexion was so much like all else I have described that I felt there was nowhere I could turn, not even to my own flesh, to escape its aspect. It was then I sensed that peculiar panic welling up within me that often precedes one's emergence from a nightmare. Yet before I broke free of my dream, I beheld one further occurrence of the ubiquitous color of that island. As if to heighten the horror of my oneiric visions, it was also the color of the inkish waters washing upon the island's shores and trending into the far distance.

As I wrote a few pages ago, I have been awake for some hours now. What I did not mention was the state in which I found myself after waking. Throughout the dream, and particularly in those last moments when I positively identified that foul place, there was an unseen *presence*, something I could feel was circulating within all things and unifying them in an infinitely extensive body of evil. I suppose it is

nothing unusual that I continued to be under this visionary spell even after I left my bed. I tried to invoke the gods of the ordinary world—calling them with the whistle of a coffee pot and praying before their icon of the electric light—but they were too weak to deliver me from that other whose name I can no longer bring myself to write. It seemed to be in possession of my house, of every common object inside and the whole of the dark world outside. Yes—lurking among the watchful winds of this and the several worlds. Everything seemed to be a manifestation of this evil and to my eyes was taking on its aspect. I could feel it also emerging in myself, growing stronger behind this living face that I am afraid to confront in the mirror.

Nevertheless, these dream-induced illusions now seem to be abating, perhaps driven off by my writing about them. Like someone who has had too much to drink the night before and swears off liquor for life, I have forsworn any further indulgence in weird reading matter. No doubt this is only a temporary vow, and soon enough my old habits will return. But certainly not before morning!

The Puppets in the Park

Some days later, and quite late at night.

Well, it seems this letter has mutated into a chronicle of my adventures Nethescurialian. See, I can now write that unique nomen with ease; furthermore, I feel almost no apprehension in stepping up to my mirror. Soon I may even be able to sleep in the way I once did, without visionary intrusions of any kind. No denying that my experiences of late have tipped the scales of the strange. I found myself just

walking restlessly about—impossible to work, you know—and always carrying with me this heavy dread in my solar plexus, as if I had feasted at a banquet of fear and the meal would not digest. Most strange, since I have been loath to take nourishment during this time. How could I ingest even the least morsel when everything looked the way it did? Hard enough to touch a doorknob or a pair of shoes, even with the protection of gloves. I could feel every damn thing squirming, not excluding my own flesh. And I could also see what was squirming beneath every surface, my vision penetrating through the usual armor of objects and discerning the same gushing *stuff* inside whatever I looked upon. It was that dark color from the dream, I could identify it clearly now. Dark and greenish. How could I possibly feed myself? How could I even bring myself to settle very long in one spot? So I kept on the move. And I tried not to look too closely at how everything, *everything* was crawling within itself and making all kinds of shapes inside there, making all kinds of faces at me. (Yet it was really all the same face, everything gorged with that same creeping stuff.) There were also sounds that I heard, voices speaking vague words, voices that came not from the mouths of the people I passed on the street but from the very bottom of their brains, garbled whisperings at first and then so clear, so eloquent.

This rising wave of chaos reached its culmination tonight and then came crashing down. But my timely maneuvering, I trust, has put everything right again.

Here, now, are the terminal events of this nightmare as they occurred. (And how I wish I were not speaking figuratively, that I was in fact only in the world of dreams or back in the pages of books and old manuscripts.) This conclusion

had its beginning in the park, a place that is actually some distance from my home, so far had I wandered. It was already late at night, but I was still walking about, treading the narrow asphalt path that winds through that island of grass and trees in the middle of the city. (And somehow it seemed I had already walked in this same place on this same night, that this had all happened to me before.) The path was lit by globes of light balanced upon slim metal poles; another glowing orb was set in the great blackness above. Off the path the grass was darkened by shadows, and the trees swishing overhead were the same color of muddied green.

After walking some indefinite time along some indefinite route, I came upon a clearing where an audience had assembled for a late-night entertainment. Strings of colored lights had been hung around the perimeter of this area and rows of benches had been set up. The people seated on these benches were all watching a tall, illuminated booth. It was the kind of booth used for puppet shows, with wild designs painted across the lower part and a curtained opening at the top. The curtains were now drawn back and two clownish creatures were twisting about in a glary light which emanated from inside the booth. They leaned and squawked and awkwardly batted each other with soft paddles they were hugging in their little arms. Suddenly they froze at the height of their battle; slowly they turned about and faced the audience. It seemed the puppets were looking directly at the place I was standing behind the last row of benches. Their misshapen heads tilted, and their glassy eyes stared straight into mine.

Then I noticed that the others were doing the same: all of them had turned around on the benches and, with expres-

sionless faces and dead puppet eyes, held me to the spot. Although their mouths didn't move, they were not silent. But the voices I heard were far more numerous than was the gathering before me. These were the voices I had been hearing as they chanted confused words in the depths of everyone's thoughts, fathoms below the level of their awareness. The words still sounded hushed and slow, monotonous phrases mingling like the sequences of a fugue. But now I could understand these words, even as more voices picked up the chant at different points and overlapped one another, saying, “Amid the rooms of our houses—across moonlit skies—throughout all souls and spirits—behind the faces of the living and the dead.”

I find it impossible to say how long it was before I was able to move, before I backed up toward the path, all those multitudinous voices chanting everywhere around me and all those many-colored lights bobbing in the wind-blown trees. Yet it now seemed to be only a single voice I heard, and a single color I saw, as I found my way home, stumbling through the greenish darkness of the night.

I knew what needed to be done. Gathering up some old boards from my basement, I piled them into the fireplace and opened the flue. As soon as they were burning brightly, I added one more thing to the fire: a manuscript whose ink was of a certain color. Blessed with a saving vision, I could now see whose signature was on that manuscript, whose hand had really written those pages and had been hiding in them for a hundred years. The author of that narrative had broken up the idol and drowned it in deep waters, but the stain of its ancient patina had stayed upon him. It had invaded the author's crabbed script of blackish green and sur-

vived there, waiting to crawl into another lost soul who failed to see what dark places he was wandering into. How I knew this to be true! And has this not been proved by the color of the smoke that rose from the burning manuscript, and keeps rising from it?

I am writing these words as I sit before the fireplace. The flames have gone out but still the smoke from the charred paper hovers within the hearth, refusing to ascend the chimney and disperse itself into the night. Perhaps the chimney has become blocked. Yes, this must be the case, this must be true. Those other things are lies, illusions. That mold-colored smoke has not taken on the shape of the idol, the shape that cannot be seen steadily and whole but keeps turning out so many arms and heads, so many eyes, then pulls them back in and brings them out again in other configurations. That shape is not drawing something out of me and putting something else in its place, something that seems to be bleeding into the words as I write. And my pen is not growing bigger in my hand, nor is my hand growing smaller, smaller...

See, there is no shape in the fireplace. The smoke is gone, gone up the chimney and out into the sky. And there is nothing in the sky, nothing I can see through the window. There is the moon, of course, high and round. But no shadow falls across the moon, no churning chaos of smoke that chokes the frail order of the earth. It is not a squirming, creeping, smearing shape I see upon the moon, not the shape of a great deformed crab scuttling out of the black oceans of infinity and invading the island of the moon, crawling with its innumerable bodies upon all the spinning islands of space. That shape is not the cancerous totality of all creatures, not

the oozing ichor that flows within all things. *Nethescurial is not the secret name of the creation.* It is not amid the rooms of our houses and beyond their walls—beneath dark waters and across moonlit skies—below earth mound and above mountain peak—in northern leaf and southern flower—inside each star and the voids between them—within blood and bone—throughout all souls and spirits—upon the watchful winds of this and the several worlds—behind the faces of the living and the dead.

I am not dying in a nightmare.

Nethescurial (1991 Grimscribe Version)

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The Idol and the Island

I have uncovered a rather wonderful manuscript, the letter began. It was an entirely fortuitous find, made during my day's dreary labors among some of the older and more decomposed remains entombed in the library archives. If I am any judge of antique documents, and of course I am, these brittle pages date back to the closing decades of the last century. (A more precise estimate of age will follow, along with a photocopy which I fear will not do justice to the delicate, crinkly script, nor to the greenish black discoloration the ink has taken on over the years.) Unfortunately there is no indication of authorship either within the manuscript itself or in the numerous and tedious papers whose company it has been keeping, none of which seem related to the item under discussion. And what an item it is a real storybook stranger in a crowd of documentary types, and probably destined to remain unknown.

I am almost certain that this invention, though at times it seems to pose as a letter or journal entry, has never appeared in common print. Given the bizarre nature of its content, I would surely have known of it before now. Although it is an untitled “statement” of sorts, the opening lines were more than enough to cause me to put everything else aside and se-

clude myself in a comer of the library stacks for the rest of the afternoon.

So it begins: “In the rooms of houses and beyond their walls beneath dark waters and across moonlit skies below earth mound and above mountain peak-in northern leaf and southern flower-inside each star and the voids between them-within blood and bone, through all souls and spirits among the watchful winds of this and the several worlds behind the faces of the living and the dead...” And there it trails off, a quoted fragment of some more ancient text. But this is certainly not the last we will hear of this all-encompassing refrain!

As it happens, the above string of phrases is cited by the narrator in reference to a certain presence, more properly an omnipresence, which he encounters on an obscure island located at some unspecified northern latitude. Briefly, he has been summoned to this island, which appears on a local map under the name of Nethescurial, in order to rendezvous with another man, an archaeologist who is designated only as Dr. N- and who will come to know the narrator of the manuscript by the self-admitted alias of “Bartholomew Gray” (they don't call ‘em like that anymore). Dr. N-, it seems, has been occupying himself upon that barren, remote, and otherwise uninhabited isle with some peculiar antiquarian rummagings. As Mr. Gray sails toward the island he observes the murky skies above him and the murky waters below. His prose style is somewhat plain for my taste, but it serves well enough once he approaches the island and takes surprisingly scrupulous notice of its eerie aspect: contorted rock formations; pointed pines and spruces of gigantic stature and uncanny movements; the masklike countenance of sea-facing

cliffs; and a sickly, stagnant fog clinging to the landscape like a fungus.

From the moment Mr. Gray begins describing the island, a sudden enchantment enters into his account. It is that sinister enchantment which derives from a profound evil that is kept at just the right distance from us so that we may experience both our love and our fear of it in one sweeping sensation. Too close and we may be reminded of an omnipresent evil in the living world, and threatened with having our sleeping sense of doom awakened into full vigor. Too far away and we become even more incurious and complacent than is our usual state, and ultimately exasperated when an imaginary evil is so poorly evoked that it fails to offer the faintest echo of its real and all-pervasive counterpart. Of course, any number of locales may serve as the setting to reveal ominous truths; evil, beloved and menacing evil, may show itself anywhere precisely because it is everywhere and is as stunningly set off by a foil of sunshine and flowers as it is by darkness and dead leaves.

A purely private quirk, nevertheless, sometimes allows the purest essence of life's malignity to be aroused only by sites such as the lonely island of Nethescurial, where the real and the unreal swirl freely and madly about in the same fog.

It seems that in this place, this far-flung realm, Dr. N- has discovered an ancient and long-sought artifact, a marginal but astonishing entry in that unspeakably voluminous journal of creation. Soon after landfall, Mr. Gray finds himself verifying the truth of the archaeologist's claims: that the island has been strangely molded in all its parts, and within its shores every manifestation of plant or mineral or anything whatever appears to have fallen at the mercy of some

shaping force of demonic temperament, a genius loci which has sculpted its nightmares out of the atoms of the local earth. Closer inspection of this insular spot on the map serves to deepen the sense of evil and enchantment that had been lightly sketched earlier in the manuscript. But I refrain from further quotation (it is getting late and I want to wrap up this letter before bedtime) in order to cut straight through the epidermis of this tale and penetrate to its very bones and viscera. Indeed, the manuscript does seem to have an anatomy of its own, its dark green holography rippling over it like veins, and I regret that my paraphrase may not deliver it alive. Enough!

Mr. Gray makes his way inland, lugging along with him a fat little travelling bag. In a clearing he comes upon a large but unadorned, almost primitive house which stands against the fantastic backdrop of the island's wartlike hills and tumorous trees. The outside of the house is encrusted with the motley and leprous stones so abundant in the surrounding landscape. The inside of the house, which the visitor sees upon opening the unlocked door, is spacious as a cathedral but far less ornamented. The walls are white and smoothly surfaced; they also seem to taper inward, pyramid-like, as they rise from floor to lofty ceiling. There are no windows, and numerous oil lamps scattered about fill the interior of the house with a sacral glow. A figure descends a long staircase, crosses the great distance of the room, and solemnly greets his guest. At first wary of each other, they eventually achieve a degree of mutual ease and finally get down to their true business.

Thus far one can see that the drama enacted is a familiar one: the stage is rigidly traditional and the performers upon

it are caught up in its style. For these actors are not so much people as they are puppets from the old shows, the ones that have told the same story for centuries, the ones that can still be very strange to us. Traipsing through the same old foggy scene, seeking the same old isolated house, the puppets in these plays always find everything new and unknown, because they have no memories to speak of and can hardly recall making these stilted motions countless times in the past. They struggle through the same gestures, repeat the same lines, although in rare moments they may feel a dim suspicion that this has all happened before. How like they are to the human race itself! This is what makes them our perfect representatives this and the fact that they are handcarved in the image of maniacal victims who seek to share the secrets of their individual torments as their strings are manipulated by the same master.

The secrets which these two Punchinellos share are rather deviously presented by the author of this confession (for upon consideration this is the genre to which it truly belongs). Indeed, Mr. Gray, or whatever his name might be, appears to know much more than he is telling, especially with respect to his colleague the archaeologist. Nevertheless, he records what Dr. N- knows and, more importantly, what this avid excavator has found buried on the island. The thing is only a fragment of an object dating from antiquity. Known to be part of a religious idol, it is difficult to say which part. It is a twisted piece of a puzzle, one suggesting that the figure as a whole is intensely unbeautiful. The fragment is also darkened with the verdigris of centuries, causing its substance to resemble something like decomposing jade.

And were the other pieces of this idol also to be found on the same island? The answer is no. The idol seems to have been shattered ages ago, and each broken part of it buried in some remote place so that the whole of it might not easily be joined together again. Although it was a mere representation, the effigy itself was the focus of a great power. The ancient sect which was formed to worship this power seem to have been pantheists of a sort, believing that all created things—appearances to the contrary—are of a single, unified, and transcendent stuff, an emanation of a central creative force. Hence the ritual chant which runs "in the rooms of houses", et cetera, and alludes to the all-present nature of this deity-a most primal and pervasive type of god, one that falls into the category of "gods who eclipse all others", territorialist divinities whose claim to the creation purportedly supersedes that of their rivals. (The words of the famous chant, by the way, are the only ones to come down to us from the ancient cult and appeared for the first time in an ethnographical, quasi-esoteric work entitled Illuminations of the Ancient World, which was published in the latter part of the nineteenth century, around the same time, I would guess, as this manuscript I am rushing to summarize was written.) At some point in their career as worshipants of the "Great One God", a shadow fell upon the sect. It appears that one day it was revealed to them, in a manner both obscure and hideous, that the power to which they bowed was essentially evil in character and that their religious mode of pantheism was in truth a kind of pandemonism. But this revelation was not a surprise to all of the sectarians, since there seems to have been an internecine struggle which ended in slaughter. In any case, the anti-demonists prevailed, and

they immediately rechristened their ex-deity to reflect its newly discovered essence in evil. And the name by which they henceforth called it was Nethescurial.

A nice turn of affairs: this obscure island openly advertizes itself as the home of the idol of Nethescurial. Of course, this island is only one of several to which the pieces of the vandalized totem were scattered. The original members of the sect who had treacherously turned against their god knew that the power concentrated in the effigy could not be destroyed, and so they decided to parcel it out to isolated corners of the earth where it could do the least harm. But would they have brought attention to this fact by allowing these widely disseminated burial plots to bear the name of the pandemoniacal god? This is doubtful, just as it is equally unlikely that it was they who built those crude houses, temples of a fashion, to mark the spot where a particular shard of the old idol might be located by others.

So Dr. N- is forced to postulate a survival of the demonist faction of the sect, a cult that had devoted itself to searching out those places which had been transformed by the presence of the idol and might thus be known by their gruesome features. This quest would require a great deal of time and effort for its completion, given the global reaches where those splinters of evil might be tucked away. Known as the "seeking", it also involved the enlistment of outsiders, who in latter days were often researchers into the ways of bygone cultures, though they remained ignorant that the cause they served was still a living one. Dr. N- therefore warns his "colleague, Mr. Gray", that they may be in danger from those who carried on the effort to reassemble the idol and revive its power. The very presence of that great and crude house

on the Island certainly proved that the cult was already aware of the location of this fragment of the idol. In fact, the mysterious Mr. Gray, not unexpectedly, is actually a member of the cult in its modem incarnation; furthermore, he has brought with him to the island-bulky travelling bag, you know-all the other pieces of the idol, which have been recovered through centuries of seeking. Now he only needs the one piece discovered by Dr. N- to make the idol whole again for the first time in a couple millennia.

But he also needs the archaeologist himself as a kind of sacrifice to Nethescurial, a ceremony which takes place later the same night in the upper part of the house. If I may telescope the ending for brevity's sake, the sacrificial ritual holds some horrific surprises for Mr. Gray (these people seem never to realize what they are getting themselves into), who soon repents of his evil practices and is driven to smash the idol to pieces once more. Making his escape from that weird island, he throws these pieces overboard, sowing the cold gray waters with the scraps of an incredible power. Later, fearing an obscure threat to his existence (perhaps the reprisal of his fellow cultists), he composes an account of a horror which is both his own and that of the whole human race.

End of manuscript. (Except for the concluding lines, which reveal the somewhat extravagant, but not entirely uninteresting, conclusion of the narrator himself.)

Now, despite my penchant for such wild yarns as I have just attempted to describe, I am not oblivious to their shortcomings. For one thing, whatever emotional impact the narrative may have lost in the foregoing precis, it certainly gained in coherence: the incidents in the manuscript are

clumsily developed, important details lack proper emphasis, impossible things are thrown at the reader without any real effort at persuasion of their veracity. I do admire the fantastic principle at the core of this piece. The nature of that pandemoniac entity is very intriguing. Imagine all of creation as a mere mask for the foulest evil, an absolute evil whose reality is mitigated only by our blindness to it, an evil at the heart of things, existing "inside each star and the voids between them-within blood and bone through all souls and spirits", and so forth. There is even a reference in the manuscript that suggests an analogy between Nethescurial and that beautiful myth of the Australian aborigines known as the Alchera (the Dreamtime, or Dreaming), a super-reality which is the source of all we see in the world around us. (And this reference will be useful in dating the manuscript, since it was toward the end of the last century that Australian anthropologists made the aboriginal cosmology known to the general public.) Imagine the universe as the dream, the feverish nightmare of a demonic demiurge. O Supreme Nethescurial!

The problem is that such supernatural inventions are indeed quite difficult to imagine. So often they fail to materialize in the mind, to take on a mental texture, and thus remain unfelt as anything but an abstract monster of metaphysics an elegant or awkward schematic that cannot rise from the paper to touch us. Of course, we do need to keep a certain distance from such specters as Nethescurial, but this is usually provided by the medium of words as such, which ensnare all kinds of fantastic creatures before they can tear us body and soul. (And yet the words of this particular manuscript seem rather weak in this regard, possibly because they

are only the drab green scratchings of a human hand and not the heavy mesh of black type.)

But we do want to get close enough to feel the foul breath of these beasts, or to see them as prehistoric leviathans circling about the tiny island on which we have taken refuge. Even if we are incapable of a sincere belief in ancient cults and their unheard of idols, even if these pseudonymous adventurers and archaeologists appear to be mere shadows on a wall, and even if strange houses on remote islands are of shaky construction, there may still be a power in these things that threatens us like a bad dream. And this power emanates not so much from within the tale as it does from somewhere behind it, someplace of infinite darkness and ubiquitous evil in which we may walk unaware.

But never mind these night thoughts; it's only to bed that I will walk after closing this letter.

Postscript

Later the same night.

Several hours have passed since I set down the above description and analysis of that manuscript. How naive those words of mine now sound to me. And yet they are still true enough, from a certain perspective. But that perspective was a privileged one which, at least for the moment, I do not enjoy. The distance between me and a devastating evil has lessened considerably. I no longer find it so difficult to imagine the horrors delineated in that manuscript, for I have known them in the most intimate way. What a fool I seem to myself for playing with such visions. How easily a simple dream can destroy one's sense of safety, if only for a few tur-

bulent hours. Certainly I have experienced all this before, but never as acutely as tonight.

I had not been asleep for long but apparently long enough. At the start of the dream I was sitting at a desk in a very dark room. It also seemed to me that the room was very large, though I could see little of it beyond the area of the desktop, at either end of which glowed a lamp of some kind. Spread out before me were many papers varying in size. These I knew to be maps of one sort or another, and I was studying them each in turn. I had become quite absorbed in these maps, which now dominated the dream to the exclusion of all other images. Each of them focused on some concatenation of islands without reference to larger, more familiar land masses.

A powerful impression of remoteness and seclusion was conveyed by these irregular daubs of earth fixed in bodies of water that were unnamed. But although the location of the islands was not specific, somehow I was sure that those for whom the maps were meant already had this knowledge. Nevertheless, this secrecy was only superficial, for no esoteric key was required to seek out the greater geography of which these maps were an exaggerated detail: they were all distinguished by some known language in which the islands were named, different languages for different maps. Yet upon closer view (indeed, I felt as if I were actually journeying among those exotic fragments of land, tiny pieces of shattered mystery), I saw that every map had one thing in common: within each group of islands, whatever language was used to name them, there was always one called Nethescurial. It was as if all over the world this terrible name had been insinuated into diverse locales as the only one suitable

for a certain island. Of course there were variant cognate forms and spellings, sometimes transliterations, of the word. (How precisely I saw them!) Still, with the strange conviction that may overcome a dreamer, I knew these places had all been claimed in the name of Nethescurial and that they bore the unique sign of something which had been buried there the pieces of that dismembered idol.

And with this thought, the dream reshaped itself. The maps dissolved into a kind of mist; the desk before me became something else, an altar of coarse stone, and the two lamps upon it flared up to reveal a strange object now positioned between them. So many visions in the dream were piercingly clear, but this dark object was not. My impression was that it was conglomerate in form, suggesting a monstrous whole. At the same time these outlines which alluded to both man and beast, flower and insect, reptiles, stones, and countless things I could not even name, all seemed to be changing, mingling in a thousand ways that prevented any sensible image of the idol.

With the upsurge in illumination offered by the lamps, I could see that the room was truly of unusual dimensions. The four enormous walls slanted toward one another and joined at a point high above the floor, giving the space around me the shape of a perfect pyramid. But I now saw things from an oddly remote perspective: the altar with its idol stood in the middle of the room and I was some distance away, or perhaps not even in the scene. Then, from some dark comer or secret door, there emerged a file of figures walking slowly toward the altar and finally congregating in a half-circle before it. I could see that they were all quite skeletal in shape, for they were identically dressed in a black

material which clung tightly to their bodies and made them look like skinny shadows. They seemed to be actually bound in blackness from head to foot, with only their faces exposed. But they were not, in fact, faces they were pale, expressionless, and identical masks. The masks were without openings and bestowed upon their wearers a terrible anonymity, an ancient anonymity. Behind these smooth and barely contoured faces were spirits beyond all hope or consolation except in the evil to which they would willingly abandon themselves. Yet this abandonment was a highly selective process, a ceremony of the chosen. One of the white-faced shadows stepped forward from the group, seemingly drawn forth into the proximity of the idol. The figure stood motionless, while from within its dark body something began to drift out like luminous smoke. It floated, swirling gently, toward the idol and there was absorbed. And I knew —for was this not my own dream?—that the idol and its sacrifice were becoming one within each other. This spectacle continued until nothing of the glowing, ectoplasmic haze remained to be extracted, and the figure now shrunken to the size of a marionette collapsed. But soon it was being lifted, rather tenderly, by another from the group who placed the dwarfish form upon the altar and, taking up a knife, carved deep into the body, making no sound. Then something oozed upon the altar, something thick and oily and strangely colored, darkly colored though not with any of the shades of blood. Although the strangeness of this color was more an idea than a matter of vision, it began to fill the dream and to determine the final stage of its development.

Quite abruptly, that closed, cavernous room dissolved into an open stretch of land: open yet also cluttered with a

bric-a-brac topography whose crazed shapes were all of that single and sinister color. The ground was as if covered with an ancient, darkened mold and the things rising up from it were the same. Surrounding me was a landscape that might once have been of stone and earth and trees (such was my impression) but had been transformed entirely into something like petrified slime. I gazed upon it spreading before me, twisting in the way of wrought iron tracery or great overgrown gardens of writhing coral, an intricate latticework of hardened mulch whose surface was overrun with a chaos of little carvings, scabby designs that suggested a world of demonic faces and forms. And it was all composed in that color which somehow makes me think of rotted lichen. But before I exited in panic from my dream, there was one further occurrence of this color: the inkish waters washing upon the shores of the island around me.

As I wrote a few pages ago, I have been awake for some hours now. What I did not mention was the state in which I found myself after waking. Throughout the dream, and particularly in those last moments when I positively identified that foul place, there was an unseen presence, something I could feel was circulating within all things and unifying them in an infinitely extensive body of evil. I suppose it is nothing unusual that I continued to be under this visionary spell even after I left my bed. I tried to invoke the gods of the ordinary world—calling them with the whistle of a coffee pot and praying before their icon of the electric light—but they were too weak to deliver me from that other whose name I can no longer bring myself to write. It seemed to be in possession of my house, of every common object inside and the whole of the dark world outside. Yes lurking among

the watchful winds of this and the several worlds. Everything seemed to be a manifestation of this evil and to my eyes was taking on its aspect. I could feel it also emerging in myself, growing stronger behind this living face that I am afraid to confront in the mirror.

Nevertheless, these dream-induced illusions now seem to be abating, perhaps driven off by my writing about them. Like someone who has had too much to drink the night before and swears off liquor for life, I have forsworn any further indulgence in weird reading matter. No doubt this is only a temporary vow, and soon enough my old habits will return. But certainly not before morning!

The Puppets in the Park

Some days later, and quite late at night.

Well, it seems this letter has mutated into a chronicle of my adventures Nethescurialian. See, I can now write that unique nomen with ease; furthermore, I feel almost no apprehension in stepping up to my mirror. Soon I may even be able to sleep in the way I once did, without visionary intrusions of any kind. No denying that my experiences of late have tipped the scales of the strange. I found myself just walking restlessly about—impossible to work, you know—and always carrying with me this heavy dread in my solar plexus, as if I had feasted at a banquet of fear and the meal would not digest. Most strange, since I have been loath to take nourishment during this time. How could I put anything into my mouth, when everything looked the way it did? Hard enough to touch a doorknob or a pair of shoes, even with the protection of the gloves. I could feel every

damn thing squirming, not excluding my own flesh. And I could also see what was squirming beneath every surface, my vision penetrating through the usual armor of objects and discerning the same gushing stuff inside whatever I looked upon. It was that dark color from the dream, I could identify it clearly now. Dark and greenish. How could I possibly feed myself? How could I even bring myself to settle very long in one spot? So I kept on the move. And I tried not to look too closely at how everything, everything was crawling within itself and making all kinds of shapes inside there, making all kinds of faces at me. (Yet it was really all the same face, everything gorged with that same creeping stuff.) There were also sounds that I heard, voices speaking vague words, voices that came not from the mouths of the people I passed on the street but from the very bottom of their brains, garbled whisperings at first and then so clear, so eloquent.

This rising wave of chaos reached its culmination tonight and then came crashing down. But my timely maneuvering, I trust, has put everything right again.

Here, now, are the terminal events of this nightmare as they occurred. (And how I wish I were not speaking figuratively, that I was in fact only in the world of dreams or back in the pages of books and old manuscripts.) This conclusion had its beginning in the park, a place that is actually some distance from my home, so far had I wandered. It was already late at night, but I was still walking about, treading the narrow asphalt path that winds through that island of grass and trees in the middle of the city. (And somehow it seemed I had already walked in this same place on this same night, that this had all happened to me before.) The path

was lit by globes of light balanced upon slim metal poles; another glowing orb was set in the great blackness above. Off the path the grass was darkened by shadows, and the trees swishing overhead were the same color of muddied green.

After walking some indefinite time along some indefinite route, I came upon a clearing where an audience had assembled for some late-night entertainment. Strings of colored lights had been hung around the perimeter of this area and rows of benches had been set up. The people seated on these benches were all watching a tall, illuminated booth. It was the kind of booth used for puppet shows, with wild designs painted across the lower part and a curtained opening at the top. The curtains were now drawn back and two clownish creatures were twisting about in a glary light which emanated from inside the booth. They leaned and squawked and awkwardly batted each other with soft paddles they were hugging in their soft littIe arms. Suddenly they froze at the height of their battle; slowly they turned about and faced the audience. It seemed the puppets were looking directly at the place I was standing behind the last row of benches. Their misshapen heads tilted, and their glassy eyes stared straight into mine.

Then I noticed that the others were doing the same: all of them had turned around on the benches and, with expressionless faces and dead puppet eyes, held me to the spot. Although their mouths did move, they were not silent. But the voices I heard were far more numerous than was the gathering before me. These were the voices I had been hearing as they chanted confused words in the depths of everyone's thoughts, fathoms below the level of their awareness. The words still sounded hushed and slow, monotonous phrases

mingling like the sequences of a fugue. But now I could understand these words, even as more voices picked up the chant at different points and overlapped one another, saying, “In the rooms of houses… across moonlit skies… through all souls and spirits… behind the faces of the living and the dead.”

I find it impossible to say how long it was before I was able to move, before I backed up toward the path, all those multitudinous voices chanting everywhere around me and all those many-colored lights bobbing in the wind-blown trees. Yet it seemed only a single voice I heard, and a single color I saw, as I found my way home, stumbling through the greenish darkness of the night.

I knew what needed to be done. Gathering up some old boards from my basement, I piled them into the fireplace and opened the flue. As soon as they were burning brightly, I added one more thing to the fire: a manuscript whose ink was of a certain color. Blessed with a saving vision, I could now see whose signature was on that manuscript, whose hand had really written those pages and had been hiding in them for a hundred years. The author of that narrative had broken up the idol and drowned it in deep waters, but the stain of its ancient patina had stayed upon him. It had invaded the author's crabbed script of blackish green and survived there, waiting to crawl into another lost soul who failed to see what dark places he was wandering into. How I knew this to be true! And has this not been proved by the color of the smoke that rose from the burning manuscript, and keeps rising from it?

I am writing these words as I sit before the fireplace.

But the flames have gone out and still the smoke from the charred paper hovers within hearth, refusing to ascend the chimney and disperse itself into the night. Perhaps the chimney has become blocked. Yes, this must be the case, this must be true. Those other things are lies, illusions. That mold-colored smoke has not taken on the shape of the idol, the shape that cannot be seen steadily and whole but keeps turning out so many arms and heads, so many eyes, and then pulling them back in and bringing them out again in other configurations. That shape is not drawing something out of me and putting something else in its place, something that seems to be bleeding into the words as I write. And my pen is not growing bigger in my hand, nor is my hand growing smaller, smaller…

See, there is no shape in the fireplace. The smoke is gone, gone up the chimney and out into the sky. And there is nothing in the sky, nothing I can see through the window. There is the moon, of course, high and round.

But no shadow falls across the moon, no churning chaos of smoke that chokes the frail order of the earth, no shifting cloud of nightmares enveloping moons and suns and stars. It is not a squirming, creeping, smearing shape I see upon the moon, not the shape of a great deformed crab scuttling out of the black oceans of infinity and invading the island of the moon, crawling with its innumerable bodies upon all the spinning islands of inky space. That shape is not the cancerous totality of all creatures, not the oozing ichor that flows within all things. Nethescurial is not the secret name of the creation. It is not in the rooms of houses and beyond their walls… beneath dark waters and across moonlit skies… below earth mound and above mountain peak… in northern

leaf and southern flower… inside each star and the voids between them… within blood and bone, through all souls and spirits… among the watchful winds of this and the several worlds… behind the faces of the living and the dead. I am not dying in a nightmare.

The Cocoons (2011 Grimscribe Version)

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Early one morning, hours before sunrise, I was awakened by Dr. Dublanc. He was standing at the foot of my bed, lightly tugging on its layered covers. In my quasi-somnolent state, I was convinced for a moment that a small animal was prancing about on my bedclothes, its movements signifying some nocturnal ritual unknown to higher forms of life. Then I saw a gloved hand twitching in the glow of the street-light outside my window. Finally, I identified the silhouette, shaped by a hat and overcoat, of Dr. Dublanc.

I switched on the nightstand lamp and sat up to face the well-known intruder. “What's wrong?” I asked as if in protest.

“My apologies,” he said in a rather unapologetic tone. “There is someone I want you to meet. I think it might be beneficial for you.”

“If that's what you say. But can't it wait? I haven't been sleeping well as it is. Better than anyone you should know that.”

“Of course I know. I also know other things,” he asserted, betraying his annoyance. “The gentleman I want to introduce to you will be leaving the country very soon, so there is a question of timing.”

“All the same…”

“Yes, I know—your nervous condition. Here, take these.”

Dr. Dublanc placed two egg-shaped pills in the palm of my hand. I put them to my lips and then swallowed a half-glass of water that was on the nightstand. I set down the empty glass next to my alarm clock, which emitted a soft grinding noise due to some unknown mutations of its internal mechanism. My eyes became fixed by the slow, even movement of the second hand, but Dr. Dublanc, in a quietly urgent voice, brought me out of my trance.

“We should really be going. I have a taxi waiting outside.”

So I hurried, thinking that I would end up being charged for this excursion, cab fare and all.

Dr. Dublanc had left the taxi standing in the alley behind my apartment building. Its headlights beamed rather weakly in the blackness, scarcely guiding us as we approached the vehicle. Side by side, the doctor and I proceeded over the uneven pavement and through blotched vapors emerging from the fumaroles of several sewer covers. I could see the moon shining between the close rooftops, and I thought that it subtly shifted phases before my eyes, bloating a bit into fullness. The doctor caught me staring.

“It's not going haywire up there, if that's what is bothering you.”

“But it seemed to be changing.”

With a growl of exasperation, the doctor pulled me after him into the cab.

The driver appeared to have been stilled into a state of dormancy. Yet Dr. Dublanc was able to evoke a response when he called out an address to the hack, who turned his thin rodent face toward the back seat and glared briefly. For a time we sat in silence as the taxi coasted through a series of unpeopled avenues. At that hour the world on the other side

of my window seemed to be no more than a mass of shadows wavering at a great distance. The doctor touched my arm and said, “Don't worry if the pills I gave you seem to have no immediate effect.”

“I trust your judgment,” I said, only to receive a doubtful glance from the doctor. “Well, it would help if you told me why we're sitting in the back of a taxi at this hour. Just who are we going to see that's so important? What's the mystery?”

“No mystery,” the doctor replied. “We're going to see a former patient of mine. Not to say that some unfortunate aspects do not still exist in his case. For certain reasons I will be introducing him to you as ‘Mr. Catch,’ though he's also a doctor of sorts—a brilliant scientist, in fact. Primarily I would like you to view a document relating to his work. A film, to be precise. It's something quite remarkable. And possibly beneficial—to you, I mean. That's all I can say at the moment.”

I nodded as if this disclosure had satisfied me. Then I noticed how far we had gone, almost to the opposite end of the city, if that was possible in what seemed a relatively short period of time. (I had forgotten to wear my watch, and this negligence somewhat aggravated my lack of orientation.) The district in which we were now traveling was of the lowest order, a landscape without pattern or substance, especially as I viewed it by moonlight.

There might be an open field heaped with debris, a devastated plain where bits of glass and scraps of metal glittered. Occasionally a solitary building of some indiscernible nature stood out in this wasteland, a skeletal structure with all markings of identity scraped off its bones. And then,

turning a corner, one left behind this lunar spaciousness and entered a densely tangled nest of houses, the dwarfish and the great all tightly nestled together and all eaten away, disfigured. Even as I watched them through the taxi's windows they appeared to be carrying on their corruption, mutating in the dull light of the moon. Roofs and chimneys elongated toward the stars, dark bricks multiplied and bulged like tumors upon the façades of houses, entire streets twisted themselves along some unearthly design. Although a few windows were filled with light, however sickly, the only human being I saw was a derelict crumpled at the base of a traffic sign.

"Sorry, doctor, but this may be too much."

"Just hold on to yourself," he said, "we're almost there. Driver, pull into that alley behind those houses."

The taxi joggled as we made our way through the narrow passage. On either side of us were high wooden fences beyond which rose so many houses of such impressive height and bulk, though of course they were still monuments to decay. The cab's headlights were barely up to the task of illuminating the cramped little alley, which seemed to become ever narrower the further we proceeded. Suddenly the driver jerked us to a stop to avoid running over an old man slouched against the fence, an empty bottle lying at his side.

"This is where we get out," said Dr. Dublanc. "Wait here for us, driver."

As we emerged from the taxi I pulled at the doctor's sleeve, whispering about the expense of the fare. He replied in a loud voice, "You should worry more about getting a taxi to take us back home. They keep their distance from this neighborhood and rarely answer the calls they receive to

come in here. Isn't that true, driver?" But the man had returned to that dormant state in which I first saw him. "Come on," said the doctor. "He'll wait for us. This way."

Dr. Dublanc pushed back a section of the fence that formed a kind of loosely hinged gate, closing it carefully behind us after we passed through the opening. On the other side was a small backyard, actually a miniature dumping ground where shadows bulged with refuse. And before us, I assumed, stood the house of Mr. Catch. It seemed very large, with an incredible number of bony peaks and dormers outlined against the sky, and even a weathervane in some vague animal-shape that stood atop a ruined turret grazed by moonlight. But although the moon was as bright as before, it now appeared to be considerably thinner, as if it had been worn down just like everything else in that neighborhood.

"It hasn't altered in the least," the doctor assured me. He was holding open the back door of the house and gesturing for me to approach.

"Perhaps no one's home," I suggested.

"The door's unlocked. You see how he's expecting us?"

"There don't appear to be any lights in use."

"Mr. Catch likes to conserve on certain expenses. A minor mania of his. But in other ways he's quite extravagant. And by no means is he a poor man. Watch yourself on the porch —some of these boards are not what they once were."

As soon as I was standing by the doctor's side he removed a flashlight from the pocket of his overcoat, shining a path into the dark interior of the house. Once inside, that yellowish swatch of illumination began flitting around in the blackness. It settled briefly in a cobwebbed corner of the ceiling, then ran down a blank battered wall and jittered along

warped floor moldings. For a moment it revealed two suitcases, quite well used, at the bottom of a stairway. It slid smoothly up the stairway banister and flew straight to the floors above, where we heard some scraping sounds, as if an animal with long-nailed paws was moving about.

“Does Mr. Catch keep a pet?” I asked in a low voice.

“Why shouldn't he? But I don't think we'll find him up there.”

We went deeper into the house, passing through many rooms which fortunately were unobstructed by furniture. Sometimes we crushed bits of broken glass underfoot; once I inadvertently kicked an empty bottle and sent it clanging across a bare floor. Reaching the far side of the house, we entered a long hallway flanked by several doors. All of them were closed and behind some of them we heard sounds similar to those being made on the second floor. We also heard footsteps slowly ascending a stairway. Then the last door at the end of the hallway opened, and a watery light pushed back some of the shadows ahead of us. A round-bodied little man was standing in the light, lazily beckoning to us.

“You're late. You're very late,” he chided while leading us down into the cellar. His voice was high-pitched yet also quite raspy. “I was just about to leave.”

“My apologies,” said Dr. Dublanc, who sounded entirely sincere on this occasion. “Mr. Catch, allow me to introduce —”

“Never mind that ‘Mr. Catch’ nonsense. You know well enough what things are like for me, don't you, doctor? So let's get started, I'm on a schedule now.”

In the cellar we paused amid the quivering light of candles, dozens of them positioned high and low, melting

upon a shelf or an old crate or right on the filth-covered floor. Among the surrounding objects, I could see that an old-fashioned film projector had been set up on a table toward the center of the room, and a portable movie screen stood by the opposite wall. The projector was plugged into what appeared to be a small electrical generator humming on the floor.

"I think there are some chairs about that you can sit on," said Mr. Catch as he threaded the film around the spools of the projector. Then for the first time he spoke to me directly. "I'm not sure how much the doctor has explained about what I'm going to show you. Probably very little."

"Yes, and deliberately so," interrupted Dr. Dublanc. "If you just roll the film I think my purpose will be served, with or without explanations. What harm can it do?"

Mr. Catch made no reply. After blowing out some of the candles to darken the room sufficiently, he switched on the projector, which was a rather noisy mechanism. I worried that whatever dialogue or narration the film might contain would be drowned out between the whirring of the projector and the humming of the generator. But I soon realized that this was a silent film, a cinematic document that in every aspect of its production was thoroughly primitive, from its harsh light and coarse photographic texture to its nearly unintelligible scenario.

It seemed to serve as a visual record of a scientific experiment, a laboratory demonstration in fact. The setting, nevertheless, was anything but clinical—a bare wall in a cellar which in some ways resembled, yet was not identical to, the one where I was viewing this film. And the subject was human: a shabby, unshaven, and unconscious derelict who had

been propped up against a crude grayish wall. Not too many moments passed before the man began to stir, perhaps awakening from a deep stupor. However, the movements he made did not appear to be his own. More specifically, they seemed to be the spasmodic twitchings of some energy that *inhabited* the old tramp. One of his legs wiggled for a second. Then his chest heaved and collapsed. Soon his head began to wobble, and it kept on wobbling, as if something was making its way through the derelict's scalp, rustling among long greasy locks. Part of it finally poked upwards—a thin stick-like thing. More of them emerged, dark wiry appendages that were bristling and bending and reaching for the outer world. At the end of each was a pair of slender snapping pincers. What ultimately broke through that shattered skull, pulling itself out with a wriggling motion of its many newborn arms, was approximately the size and proportions of a spider monkey. It had tiny translucent wings which fluttered a few times, glistening but useless, and seemed to be in an emaciated condition. When it twisted its head toward the camera, it stared into the lens with malicious eyes and seemed to be chattering with its beaked mouth.

I whispered to Dr. Dublanc: “Please, I'm afraid that—”

“Exactly,” he hissed back at me. “But you need to face certain realities so that you may free yourself from your fear of them.”

Now it was my turn to give the doctor a dubious look. I was not blind to the fact that he was practising a highly unconventional form of therapeutics, to say the least. And our presence in that cellar—

that cold swamp of shadows in which candles flickered like

fireflies—seemed to be as much for Dr. Dublanc's benefit as it was for mine, if “benefit” is the proper word in this case.

“You might indulge me on occasion,” I said.

“Shhh. Watch the film.”

It was almost finished. After the creature had hatched from its strange egg, it proceeded very rapidly to consume the grubby derelict, leaving only a collection of bones attired in cast-off clothes. Picked perfectly clean, the skull leaned wearily to one side. And the creature, which earlier had been so emaciated, had grown rather plump with its feast, becoming bloated and meaty like an overfed dog. In the final sequence, a net was tossed into the scene, capturing the gigantic vermin and dragging it off camera. Then whiteness filled the screen and the film was flapping on its reel.

“So what did you think?” said the doctor. No doubt noticing that I was still under the spell of what I had just seen, he snapped his fingers in front of my face. I blinked and then looked at him in dazed silence. Taking advantage of the moment, he tried to lend a certain focus or coloration to the events of the film. “You must understand,” he explained, “that the integrity of material forms is only a prejudice. This is not to mention the substance of those forms, which is an even more dubious state of affairs. That a monstrous insect could burst forth from the anatomy of a human being should be no cause for consternation. Your prejudices about a clockwork world of sunrise schedules and lunar routines have been a real obstacle in the therapy I've been practising with you. You've put me in the position of having to cater to your anxiety that the world is not *ruled by regularity*. But it's time you realized that nothing is bolted down, so to speak. And no more is that thing which we call the mind, with its

craving for evermore novel sensations and perceptions. You could learn a great deal from Mr. Catch. I know that I have. Of course, I still recognize that there remain some unfortunate aspects to his case—there was only so much I could do for him—but nonetheless I think that he has gained rare and invaluable knowledge, the consequences notwithstanding.

"His research had taken him into areas where, how should I say, where the shapes and levels of phenomena, the multiple planes of natural existence, revealed their ability to establish new relationships with one another… to become interconnected, as it were, in ways that we never thought possible. At some point everything became a blur for him, a sort of pandemonium of forces, a phantasmagoria of possibilities which he eagerly engaged. We can have no idea of the tastes and temptations that may emerge or develop in the course of such work… a curious hedonism that could not be controlled. Oh, the vagaries of omnipotence, breeder of indulgence. Well, Mr. Catch retreated in panic from his own powers, yet he could not put the pieces back as they had been: unheard of habits and responses had already ingrained themselves into his system. The worst sort of slavery, but how persuasively he spoke of the euphoria he had known, the infinitely diverse sensations beyond all common understanding. It was just this understanding that I required in order to free him of a life that, in its own fashion, had become as abysmal and problematic as your own—except that his pathology existed at the opposite pole. Some middle ground must be established, some balance. How well I understand that now! This is why I have brought you two together. This is the only reason, however it may seem to you."

“It seems to me,” I replied, “that Mr. Catch has snuck out on us. Personally, I hope we've seen the last of him.”

Dr. Dublanc emitted the shadow of a laugh. “Oh, he's still in the house. You can be sure of that. Let's take a look upstairs.”

He was, in fact, not far at all. Stepping into that hallway of closed doors at the top of the cellar stairs, we saw that one of those doors was now partially open and the room beyond it was faintly aglow. Without announcing us, Dr. Dublanc slowly pushed back the door until we could both see what had happened inside.

It was a small unfurnished room with a bare wooden floor upon which a candle had been fixed with its own drippings. The candlelight shone dimly on the full face of Mr. Catch, who seemed to have collapsed in a back corner of the room, lying somewhat askew. He was sweating, though it was cold in the room, and his eyes were half-closed in a kind of languorous exhaustion. But something was wrong with his mouth: it seemed to be muddied and enlarged, sloppily painted into a clown's oversized grin. On the floor beside him were, to all appearances, the freshly ravaged remains of one of those creatures in the film.

“You made me wait too long!” he suddenly shouted, opening his eyes fully and straightening himself up for a moment before his posture crumbled once again. He then repeated this outburst: “You couldn't help me and now you make me wait too long.”

“It was in order to help you that I came here,” the doctor said to him, yet all the time fixing his eyes on the mutilated carcass on the floor. When he saw that I had observed his greedy stare he regained himself. “I'm trying to help both of

you the only way you can be helped. Tell him, Mr. Catch. Tell him how you breed those amazing individuals and enable them to induce the most rapturous exaltation, bliss on the brink of apotheosis."

Mr. Catch groped in his pants pocket, pulled out a large handkerchief, and wiped off his mouth. He was smiling idiotically, quite obviously intoxicated by his recent feast, and with difficulty worked himself to a standing position. His body now seemed even more swollen and bulbous than before, really not quite human in its proportions. After replacing his handkerchief in one pocket, he reached down into the other, digging around inside it. "It's really too much to go into detail," he explained in a voice that had become placid. "What should I say? Much of it is a psychic matter. Hence, my appeal to the doctor. The rest involves some chemical formulations to instigate what is essentially a universal process of transfiguration, the so-called miracle of creation in all its forms. A catalyzing agent is introduced into the subject by insemination or ingestion." With a kind of giddy pride, he held out his open hand. In the thick pad of his palm I could see two tiny objects that were shaped like eggs. "The larvae of the gods," he said with a hint of awe in his voice.

I turned abruptly to the doctor. "The pills you gave me."

"It was the only thing that could be done for you. I've tried so hard to help you both."

"I had suspected something was up," said Mr. Catch, now reviving himself from his stupefaction. "I should never have brought you into this. Don't you realize that it's difficult enough without involving your own patients. The derelicts are one thing, but this is quite another. I'm sorry I ever in-

volved you in my predicament. Well, my suitcases are packed. It's your operation now, doctor. Let me by, time to go."

Mr. Catch maneuvered himself from the room, and a few moments later the sound of a door being slammed echoed throughout the house. The doctor kept close watch on me, waiting for some reaction, I suppose. Yet he was also listening very intently to certain sounds emanating from the rooms around us. The noise of restless skittering was everywhere.

"You understand, don't you?" asked the doctor. "Mr. Catch isn't the only one who has waited too long... far too long. I thought by now the pills would have had their effect."

I went into my pocket and removed the two little eggs which I had failed to swallow earlier. "I can't claim that I had much faith in your methods," I said. Then I tossed the pills at Dr. Dublanc who, speechless, caught them. "You won't mind if I return home by myself."

Indeed, he was probably relieved to see me go. In the course of treating Mr. Catch, the doctor had apparently also become a hideous degenerate, a wholly unbalanced specimen in need of the most radical therapy himself. As I traced my way back through the house I heard him running about opening door after door, finally crying out with a pitiful delight, "There you are, you beauties. There you are."

Although the doctor himself now seemed hopeless, I think that his therapeutic strategy may have been somewhat beneficial in my case, or at least given me a glimpse of how I could meet the demoniac undercurrents of existence halfway. For during those first few moments on that hazy morning, when the taxi edged out of the alley and passed

through that neighborhood of deteriorating houses, I felt myself attain the middle ground Dr. Dublanc spoke of—the balancing point between an anxious flight from the abyss and the temptation to plunge into it. There was a great sense of escape, as if I could exist serenely outside the grotesque ultimatums of creation, an entranced spectator casting a clinical gaze at the chaotic tumult both around and within himself.

But the feeling soon evaporated. A genuine cure for the quandaries of an inconstant existence is exceedingly rare. “Could you go a little faster?” I said to the driver, for it seemed to me that we were making no progress in our leave from that district in which all order had dissipated. Things again appeared to be changing, ready to burst forth from their sagging cocoons and take on uncertain forms. Even the pale morning sun seemed to be wavering from its proper proportions.

At the end of the ride, I was content to pay the extraordinary fare and return to my bed. The following day I started looking for a new doctor.

The Cocoons (1991 Grimscribe Version)

First published in *Weird Tales*, Winter 1991

Early one morning, hours before sunrise, I was awakened by Dr. Dublanc. He was standing at the foot of my bed, lightly tugging on the covers. For a moment I was convinced, in my quasi-somnolent state, that a small animal was prancing about on the mattress, performing some nocturnal ritual unknown to higher forms of life. Then I saw a gloved hand twitching in the glow of the streetlight outside my window. Finally I identified the silhouette, shaped by a hat and overcoat, of Dr. Dublanc.

I switched on the bedside lamp and sat up to face the well-known intruder. “What's wrong?” I asked as if in protest.

“My apologies,” he said in a polite yet unapologetic tone. “There is someone I want you to meet. I think it might be beneficial for you.”

“If that's what you say. But can't it wait? I haven't been sleeping well as it is. Better than anyone you should know that.”

“Of course I know. I also know other things,” he asserted, betraying his annoyance. “The gentleman I want to introduce to you will be leaving the country very soon, so there is a question of timing.”

“All the same…”

“Yes, I know—your nervous condition. Here, take these.” Dr. Dublanc placed two egg-shaped pills in the palm of my hand. I put them to my lips and then swallowed a half-glass of water that was on the nightstand. I set down the empty glass next to my alarm clock, which emitted a soft grinding noise due to some unknown mutations of its internal mechanism. My eyes became fixed by the slow even movement of the second hand, but Dr. Dublanc, in a quietly urgent voice, brought me out of my trance.

“We should really be going. I have a taxi waiting outside.” So I hurried, thinking that I would end up being charged for this excursion, cab fare and all.

Dr. Dublanc had left the taxi standing in the alley behind my apartment building. Its headlights beamed rather weakly in the blackness, scarcely guiding us as we approached the vehicle. Side by side, the doctor and I proceeded over uneven pavement and through blotched vapors emerging from the fumaroles of several sewer covers. But I could see the moon shining between the close rooftops, and I thought that it subtly shifted phases before my eyes, bloating a bit into fullness. The doctor caught me staring.

“It's not going haywire up there, if that's what is bothering you.”

“But it seemed to be changing.”

With a growl of exasperation, the doctor pulled me after him into the cab.

The driver appeared to have been stilled into a state of dormancy. Yet Dr. Dublanc was able to evoke a response when he called out an address to the hack, who turned his thin rodent face toward the back seat and glared briefly. For a time we sat in silence as the taxi proceeded through a

monotonous passage of unpeopled avenues. At that hour the world on the other side of my window seemed to be no more than a mass of shadows wavering at a great distance. The doctor touched my arm and said, “Don't worry if the pills I gave you seem to have no immediate effect. “

“I trust your judgement,” I said, only to receive a doubtful glance from the doctor. In order to revive my credibility, I told him what was actually on my mind: the matter of who I would be meeting, and why.

“A former patient of mine,” he answered bluntly, for it was apparent that at this point he was prepared to assume an open manner with me. “Not to say that some unfortunate aspects do not still exist in his case. For certain reasons I will be introducing him to you as ‘Mr. Catch’, though he's also a doctor of sorts—a brilliant scientist, in fact. But what I want you to see are just some films he has made in the course of his work. They are quite remarkable. Not to deny those unfortunate aspects I mentioned... yet very intriguing. And possibly beneficial—to you, I mean. Possibly most beneficial. And that's all I can say at the moment.”

I nodded as if in comprehension of this disclosure. Then I noticed how far we had gone, almost to the opposite end of the city, if that was possible in what seemed a relatively short period of time. (I had forgotten to wear my watch, and this negligence somewhat aggravated my lack of orientation.) The district in which we were now travelling was of the lowest order, a landscape without pattern or substance, especially as I viewed it by moonlight.

There might be an open field heaped with debris, a devastated plain where bits of glass and scraps of metal glittered, though perhaps a solitary house remained in this

wasteland, an empty skeletal structure scraped of its flesh. And then, turning a corner, one left behind this lunar spaciousness and entered a densely tangled nest of houses, the dwarfish and the great all tightly nestled together and all eaten away, disfigured. Even as I watched them through the taxi's windows they appeared to be carrying on their corruption, mutating in the dull light of the moon. Roofs and chimneys elongated toward the stars, dark bricks multiplied and bulged like tumors upon the façades of houses, entire streets twisted themselves along some unearthly design. Although a few windows were filled with light, however sickly, the only human being I saw was a derelict crumpled at the base of a traffic sign.

"Sorry, doctor, but this may be too much."

"Just hold on to yourself," he said, "we're almost there. Driver, pull into that alley behind those houses."

The taxi joggled as we made our way through the narrow passage. On either side of us were high wooden fences beyond which rose so many houses of such impressive height and bulk, though of course they were still monuments to decay. The cab's headlights were barely up to the task of illuminating the cramped little alley, which seemed to become ever narrower the further we proceeded. Suddenly the driver jerked us to a stop to avoid running over an old man slouched against the fence, an empty bottle lying at his side.

"This is where we get out," said Dr. Dublanc. "Wait here for us, driver."

As we emerged from the taxi I pulled at the doctor's sleeve, whispering about the expense of the fare. He replied in a loud voice, "You should worry more about getting a taxi to take us back home. They keep their distance from this

neighborhood and rarely answer the calls they receive to come in here. Isn't that true, driver?" But the man had returned to that dormant state in which I first saw him. "Come on," said the doctor. "He'll wait for us. This way. "

Dr. Dublanc pushed back a section of the fence that formed a kind of loosely hinged gate, closing it carefully behind us after we passed through the opening. On the other side was a small backyard, actually a miniature dumping ground where shadows bulged with refuse.

And before us, I assumed, stood the house of Mr. Catch.

It seemed very large, with an incredible number of bony peaks and dormers outlined against the sky, and even a weathervane in some vague animal-shape that stood atop a ruined turret grazed by moonlight. But although the moon was as bright as before, it appeared to be considerably thinner, as if it had been worn down just like everything else in that neighborhood.

"It hasn't altered in the least," the doctor assured me. He was holding open the back door of the house and gesturing for me to approach.

"Perhaps no-one's home," I suggested.

"Not at all—the door's unlocked. You see how he's expecting us?"

"There don't appear to be any lights in use."

"Mr. Catch likes to conserve on certain expenses. A minor mania of his. But in other ways he's quite extravagant. And by no means is he a poor man. Watch yourself on the porch —some of these boards are not what they once were."

As soon as I was standing by the doctor's side he removed a flashlight from the pocket of his overcoat, shining a path into the dark interior of the house. Once inside, that yellow-

ish swatch of illumination began flitting around in the blackness. It settled briefly in a cobwebbed corner of the ceiling, then ran down a blank battered wall and jittered along warped floor moldings. For a moment it revealed two suitcases, quite well used, at the bottom of a stairway. It slid smoothly up the stairway banister and flew straight to the floors above, where we heard some scraping sounds, as if an animal with long-nailed paws was moving about.

“Does Mr. Catch keep a pet?” I asked in a low voice.

“Why shouldn't he? But I don't think we'll find him up there.”

We went deeper into the house, passing through many rooms which fortunately were unobstructed by furniture. Sometimes we crushed bits of broken glass underfoot; once I inadvertently kicked an empty bottle and sent it clanging across a bare floor. Reaching the far side of the house, we entered a long hallway flanked by several doors. All of them were closed and behind some of them we heard sounds similar to those being made on the second floor. We also heard footsteps slowly ascending a stairway. Then the last door at the end of the hallway opened, and a watery light pushed back some of the shadows ahead of us. A round-bodied little man was standing in the light, lazily beckoning to us.

“You're late, you're very late,” he chided while leading us down into the cellar. His voice was high-pitched yet also quite raspy. “I was just about to leave.”

“My apologies,” said Dr. Dublanc, who sounded entirely sincere on this occasion. “Mr. Catch, allow me to introduce —”

“Never mind that Mr. Catch nonsense. You know well enough what things are like for me, don't you, doctor? So

let's get started, I'm on a schedule now."

In the cellar we paused amid the quivering light of candles, dozens of them positioned high and low, melting upon a shelf or an old crate or right on the filth-covered floor.

Even so, there was a certain lack of definition among the surrounding objects, but I could see that an old-fashioned film projector had been set up on a table toward the center of the room, and a portable movie screen stood by the opposite wall. The projector was plugged into what appeared to be a small electrical generator humming on the floor.

"I think there are some stools or whatnot you can sit on," said Mr. Catch as he threaded the film around the spools of the projector. Then for the first time he spoke to me directly. "I'm not sure how much the doctor has explained about what I'm going to show you. Probably very little."

"Yes, and deliberately so," interrupted Dr. Dublanc. "If you just roll the film I think my purpose will be served, with or without explanations. What harm can it do?"

Mr. Catch made no reply. After blowing out some of the candles to darken the room sufficiently, he switched on the projector, which was a rather noisy mechanism. I worried that whatever dialogue or narration the film might contain would be drowned out between the whirring of the projector and the humming of the generator. But I soon realized that this was a silent film, a cinematic document that in every aspect of its production was thoroughly primitive, from its harsh light and coarse photographic texture to its nearly unintelligible scenario.

It seemed to serve as a visual record of scientific experiment, a laboratory demonstration in fact. The setting, nev-

ertheless, was anything but clinical—a bare wall in a cellar which in some ways resembled, yet was not identical to, the one where I was viewing this film. And the subject was human: a shabby, unshaven, and unconscious derelict who had been propped up against a crude grayish wall. Not too many moments passed before the man began to stir.

But his movements were not those of awakening from a deep stupor; they were only spasmodic twitchings of some energy which appeared to inhabit the old tramp. A torn pant leg wiggled for a second, then his chest heaved, as if with an incredible sigh. His left arm, no his right arm, flew up in the air and immediately collapsed. Soon his head began to wobble and it kept on wobbling, even though its owner remained in a state of profound obliviousness.

Something was making its way through the derelict's scalp, rustling among the long greasy locks of an unsightly head. Part of it finally poked upwards—a thin sticklike thing. More of them emerged, dark wiry appendages that were bristling and bending and reaching for the outer world. At the end of each was a pair of slender snapping pincers. What ultimately broke through that shattered skull, pulling itself out with a wriggling motion of its many newborn arms, was approximately the size and proportions of a spider monkey. It had tiny translucent wings which fluttered a few times, glistening but useless, and was quite black, as if charred. Actually the creature seemed to be in an emaciated condition. When it turned its head toward the camera, it stared into the lens with malicious eyes and seemed to be chattering with its beaked mouth.

I whispered to Dr. Dublanc: “Please, I'm afraid that—”

“Exactly,” he hissed back at me. “You are always afraid of the least upset in the order of things. You need to face certain realities so that you may free yourself of them.”

Now it was my turn to give the doctor a skeptical glance. Yet I certainly realized that he was practising something other than facile therapeutics. And even then our presence in that cellar—that cold swamp of shadows in which candles flickered like fireflies seemed to be as much for Dr. Dublanc's benefit as it was for mine, if “benefit” is the proper word in this case.

“Those pills you gave me…”

“Shhh. Watch the film.”

It was almost finished. After the creature had hatched from its strange egg, it proceeded very rapidly to consume the grubby derelict, leaving only a collection of bones attired in cast-off clothes. Picked perfectly clean, the skull leaned wearily to one side. And the creature, which earlier had been so emaciated, had grown rather plump with its feast, becoming bloated and meaty like an overfed dog. In the final sequence, a net was tossed into the scene, capturing the gigantic vermin and dragging it off camera. Then whiteness filled the screen and the film was flapping on its reel.

“Apparently Mr. Catch has left us,” said the doctor, noticing that I remained under the spell of what I had just seen. Taking advantage of the moment, he tried to lend a certain focus or coloration to this experience. “You must understand,” he continued, “that the integrity of material forms is only a prejudice, at most a point of view. This is not to mention the substance of those forms, which is an even more dubious state of affairs. That the so-called anatomy of a human being might burst forth as a fantastic insect should be no

cause for consternation. I know that it may seem that in the past I've attempted to actually bolster your prejudices about a clockwork world of sunrise schedules and lunar routines. But this insistence has only had a paradoxical effect, just like certain drugs that in some people induce a reaction quite the opposite of the norm. All of my assurances have made you more confirmed in your suspicions that things are not bolted down, so to speak. And no more is that thing which we call the mind. We can both learn a great deal from Mr. Catch. Of course, I still recognize that there remain some unfortunate aspects to his case—there was only so much I could do for him—but nonetheless I think that he has gained rare and invaluable knowledge, the consequences notwithstanding.

"His research had taken him into areas where, how should I say, where the shapes and levels of phenomena, the multiple planes of natural existence, revealed their ability to establish new relationships with one another... to become interconnected, as it were, in ways that were never apparent. At some point everything became a blur for him, a sort of pandemonium of forces, a phantasmagoria of possibilities which he eagerly engaged. We can have no idea of the tastes and temptations that may emerge or develop in the course of such work... a curious hedonism that could not be controlled. Oh, the vagaries of omnipotence, breeder of indulgence. Well, Mr. Catch retreated in panic from his own powers, yet he could not put the pieces back as they had been: unheard of habits and responses had already ingrained themselves into his system, seemingly forever. The worst sort of slavery, no doubt, but how persuasively he spoke of the euphorias he had known, the infinitely diverse sensations beyond all common understanding. It was just this un-

derstanding that I required in order to free him of a life that, in its own fashion, had become as abysmal and problematic as your own except he is at the opposite pole. Some middle ground must be established, some balance. How well I understand that now! This is why I have brought you two together. This is the only reason, however it may seem to you."

"It seems to me," I replied, "that Mr. Catch is no longer available. "

Dr. Dublanc emitted the shadow of a laugh. "Oh, he's still in the house. You can be sure of that. Let's take a look upstairs."

He was, in fact, not far at all. Stepping into that hallway of closed doors at the top of the cellar stairs, we saw that one of those doors was now partially open and the room beyond it was faintly aglow. Without announcing us, Dr. Dublanc slowly pushed back the door until we could both see what had happened inside.

It was a small unfurnished room with a bare wooden floor upon which a candle had been fixed with its own drippings. The candlelight shone dimly on the full face of Mr. Catch, who seemed to have collapsed in a back corner of the room, lying somewhat askew. He was sweating, though it was cold in the room, and his eyes were half-closed in a kind of languorous exhaustion. But something was wrong with his mouth: it seemed to be muddied and enlarged, sloppily painted into a clown's oversized grin. On the floor beside him were, to all appearances, the freshly ravaged remains of one of those creatures in the film.

"You made me wait too long!" he suddenly shouted, opening his eyes fully and straightening himself up for a moment before his posture crumbled once again. He then repeated

this outburst: “You couldn't help me and now you make me wait too long.”

“It was in order to help you that I came here,” the doctor said to him, yet all the time fixing his eyes on the mutilated carcass on the floor. When he saw that I had observed his greedy stare he regained himself. “I'm trying to help both of you the only way you can be helped. Show him, Mr. Catch, show him how you breed those amazing individuals.”

Mr. Catch groped in his pants pocket, pulled out a large handkerchief, and wiped off his mouth. He was smiling a little idiotically, as if intoxicated, and worked himself to his feet. His body now seemed even more swollen and bulbous than before, really not quite human in its proportions. After replacing his handkerchief in one pocket, he reached down into the other, feeling around for some moments. “It's so simple,” he explained in a voice that had become placid. And it was with a kind of giddy pride that he finally said, “Oh, here they are,” and held out his open hand toward me. In the thick pad of his palm I could see two tiny objects that were shaped like eggs.

I turned abruptly to the doctor. “The pills you gave me.”

“It was the only thing that could be done for you. I've tried so hard to help you both.”

“I had a suspicion,” said Mr. Catch, now reviving himself from his stupefaction. “I should never have brought you into this. Don't you realize that it's difficult enough without involving your own patients. The derelicts are one thing, but this is quite another. Well, my suitcases are packed. It's your operation now, doctor. Let me by, time to go.”

Mr. Catch maneuvered himself from the room, and a few moments later the sound of a door being slammed echoed

throughout the house. The doctor kept close watch on me, waiting for some reaction, I suppose. Yet he was also listening very intently to certain sounds emanating from the rooms around us. The noise of restless skittering was everywhere.

"You understand, don't you?" asked the doctor. "Mr. Catch isn't the only one who has waited too long... far too long. I thought by now the pills would have had their effect."

I went into my pocket and removed the two little eggs which I had failed to swallow earlier. "I can't claim that I ever had much faith in your methods," I said. Then I tossed the pills at Dr. Dublanc who, speechless, caught them. "You won't mind if I return home by myself."

Indeed, he was relieved to see me go. As I traced my way back through the house I heard him running about and opening door after door, saying, "There you are, you beauties. There you are."

Although the doctor himself was now hopeless, I think that in some manner he had effected a cure in my case, however ephemeral it may have been, for during those first few moments on that hazy morning, when the taxi edged out of the alley and passed through that neighborhood of gnawed houses, I felt myself attain the middle ground Dr. Dublanc spoke of—the balancing point between an anxious flight from the abyss and the temptation to plunge into it. There was a great sense of escape, as if I could exist serenely outside the grotesque ultimatums of creation, an entranced spectator casting a clinical gaze at the chaotic tumult both around and within him.

But the feeling soon evaporated. "Could you go a little faster?" I said to the driver when it began to seem to me that

we were making no progress in leaving that district behind: things again appeared to be changing, ready to burst forth from their sagging cocoons and take on uncertain forms. Even the pale morning sun seemed to be wavering from its proper proportions.

At the end of the ride, I was content to pay the extraordinary fare and return to my bed. The following day I started looking for a new doctor.

The Dreaming In Nortown (2011 Grimscribe Version)

First published in *Grimscribe*, 1991

There are those who require witnesses to their doom. Not content with a solitary perdition, they seek an audience worthy of the spectacle—a mind to remember the stages of their downfall or perhaps only a mirror to multiply their abject glory. Of course, other motives may figure in this scheme, ones far too tenuous and strange for mortal reminiscence. Yet there exists a memoir of dreams in which I may recollect an erstwhile acquaintance whose name I shall give as Jack Quinn. For it was he who sensed my peculiar powers of sympathy and, employing a rather contrary stratagem, engaged them. This all began, according to my perspective, late one night in the decaying and spacious apartment which Quinn and I shared and which was located in that city—or, more precisely, in a certain region *within* it—where we attended the same university.

I was asleep. In the darkness a voice was calling me away from my ill-mapped world of dreams. Then something heavy weighed down the edge of the mattress and a slightly infernal aroma filled the room, an acrid combination of tobacco and autumn nights. A small red glow wandered in an arc toward the apex of the seated figure and there glowed even brighter, faintly lighting the lower part of a face. Quinn was smiling, the cigar in his mouth smoking in the darkness. He remained silent for a moment and crossed his legs be-

neath his long threadbare overcoat, an ancient thing that was wrapped loosely around him like a skin about to be sloughed. So many pungent Octobers were collected in that coat. It is the events of this month that I am remembering.

I assumed he was drunk, or perhaps still in the remote heights or depths of the artificial paradise he had been exploring that night. When Quinn finally spoke, it was definitely with the stumbling words of a returning explorer, a stuporous and vaguely awed voice. But he seemed more than simply drug-entranced.

He had attended a meeting, he said, speaking the word in an odd way which seemed to expand its significance. Of course there were others at this gathering, people who to me remained simply "those others." It was a kind of philosophical society, he told me. The group sounded colorful enough: midnight assemblies, the probable use of drugs, and participants in the grip of strange mystical ecstasies.

I got out of bed and switched on the light. Quinn was a chaotic sight, his clothes more crumpled than usual, his face flushed, and his long red hair intricately tangled.

"And exactly where did you go tonight?" I asked with the measure of true curiosity he seemed to be seeking. I had the distinct idea that Quinn's activities of that evening had occurred in the vicinity of Nortown (another pseudonym, of course, as are all the names in this narrative), where the apartment we shared was located. I asked him if they had.

"And perhaps in other places," he answered, laughing a little to himself as he meditated upon the gray end of his cigar. "But you might not understand. Excuse me, I have to go to bed."

“As you wish,” I replied, leaving aside all complaints about this nocturnal intrusion. He puffed on his cigar and went to his room, closing the door behind him.

This, then, was the beginning of Quinn's ultimate phase of esoteric development. And until the final night, I actually saw very little of him during that most decisive episode of his life. We were pursuing different courses of study in our graduate school days—I in anthropology and he in... it troubles me to say I was never entirely sure of his academic program. In any case, our respective timetables seldom intersected. Nonetheless, Quinn's daily movements, at least the few I was aware of, did invite curiosity. There was a general tenor of chaos that I perceived in his behavior, a quality which may or may not make for good company but which always offers promise of the extraordinary.

He continued to come in quite late at night, always entering the apartment with what seemed a contrived noisiness. After that first night he did not overtly confide his activities to me. The door to his room would close, and immediately afterward I would hear him collapse on the old springs of his mattress. It seemed he did not undress for bed, perhaps never even removed the overcoat which was becoming shabbier and more crumpled day by day. My sleep temporarily shattered, I passed this wakeful time by eavesdropping on the noises in the next room. There was a strange catalogue of sounds which either I had never noticed before or which were somehow different from the usual nightly din: low moans emanating from the most shadowy chasms of dream; sudden intakes of breath like the suction of a startled gasp; and abrupt snarls and snorts of a bestial timbre. The whole rhythm of his sleep betrayed expressions of unknown tur-

moil. And sometimes he would violate the calm darkness of the night with a series of staccato groans followed by a brief vocal siren that made me bolt up suddenly in my bed. This alarming sound surely carried the entire audible spectrum of nightmare-inspired terror… but there were also mingling overtones of awe and ecstasy, a willing submission to some unknown ordeal.

"Have you finally died and gone to hell?" I shouted one night through his bedroom door. The sound was still ringing in my ears.

"Go back to sleep," he answered, his low-pitched voice still speaking from the deeper registers of somnolence. The smell of a freshly lit cigar then filtered out of his bedroom.

After these late-night disturbances, I would sometimes sit up to watch the dun colors of dawn stirring in the distance outside my eastern window. And as the weeks went by that October, the carnival of noise going on in the next room began to work its strange influence upon my own sleep. Soon Quinn was not the only one in the apartment having nightmares, as I was inundated by a flood of eidetic horrors that left only a vague residue upon waking.

It was throughout the day that fleeting scenes of nightmare would suddenly appear to my mind, brief and vivid, as though I had mistakenly opened a strange door somewhere and, after inadvertently seeing something I should not have, quickly closed it once again with a reverberating slam. Eventually, however, my dream-censor himself fell asleep, and I recalled in total the elusive materials of one of those night-visions, which returned to me painted in scenes of garishly vibrant colors.

The dream took place at a small public library in Nortown where I sometimes retreated to study. On the oneiric plane, however, I was not a studious patron of the library but one of the librarians—the only one, it seemed, keeping vigil in that desolate institution. I was just sitting there, complacently surveying the shelves of books and laboring under the illusion that in my idleness I was performing some routine but very important function. This did not continue very long—nothing does in dreams—though the situation was one that already seemed interminable.

What shattered the status quo, initiating a new phase to the dream, was my discovery that a note scrawled upon a slip of paper had been left on the well-ordered surface of my desk. It was a request for a book and had been submitted by a library patron whose identity I puzzled over, for I had not seen anyone put it there. I fretted about this scrap of paper for many dream-moments: had it been there even before I sat down at the desk and had I simply overlooked it? I suffered a disproportionate anxiety over this possible dereliction. The imagined threat of a reprimand of some strange nature terrorized me. Without delay I phoned the back room to have the person on duty there bring forth the book. But I was truly alone in that dream library and no one answered what was to my mind now an emergency appeal. Feeling a sense of urgency in the face of some imaginary deadline, and filled with a kind of exalted terror, I snatched up the request slip and set out to retrieve the book myself.

In the stacks I saw that the telephone line was dead, for it had been ripped from the wall and lay upon the floor like the frayed end of a disciplinary whip. Trembling, I consulted the piece of paper I carried with me for the title of the book and

call-number. No longer can I remember that title, but it definitely had something to do with the name of the city, suburb of a sort, where Quinn's and my apartment was located. I proceeded to walk down a seemingly endless aisle flanked by innumerable smaller aisles between the lofty bookshelves. Indeed, they were so lofty that when I finally reached my destination I had to climb a high ladder to reach the spot where I could secure the desired book. Mounting the ladder until my shaking hands gripped the highest rung, I was at eye level with the exact call-number I was seeking, or some forgotten dream-glyphs which I took to be these letters and digits. And like these symbols, the book I found is now hopelessly unmemorable, its shape, color, and dimensions having perished on the journey back from the dream. I may have even dropped the book, but that was not important.

What was important, however, was the dark little slot created when I withdrew the book from its rank on the shelf. I peered in, somehow knowing I was supposed to do this as part of the book-retrieving ritual. I gazed deeper… and the next phase of the dream began.

The slot was a window, perhaps more of a crack in some dream-wall or a slit in the billowing membrane that protects one world against the intrusion of another. Beyond was something of a landscape—for lack of a more suitable term—which I viewed through a narrow rectangular frame. But this landscape had no earth and sky that hinged together in a neat line at the horizon, no floating or shining objects above to echo and balance their earthbound counter shapes below. This landscape was an infinite expanse of depth and distance, a never-ending morass deprived of all coherence, a state of strange existence rather than a chartable locus, hav-

ing no more geographical extension than a mirage or a rainbow. There was definitely something in my sight, elements that could be distinguished from one another but impossible to fix in any kind of relationship. I experienced a prolonged gaze at what is usually just a delirious glimpse, the way one might suddenly perceive some sidelong illusion which disappears at the turn of the head, leaving no memory of what the mind had deceptively seen.

The only way I can describe the visions I witnessed with even faint approximation is in terms of other scenes which might arouse similar impressions of tortuous chaos: perhaps a festival of colors twisting in blackness, a tentacled abyss that alternately seems to glisten moistly as with some horrendous dew, then suddenly dulls into an arid glow, like bone-colored stars shining over an extraterrestrial desert. The vista of eerie disorder that I observed was further abetted in its strangeness by my own feelings about it. They were magnified dream-feelings, those encyclopedic emotions which involve complexities of intuition, sensation, and knowledge impossible to express. My dream-emotion was indeed a monstrous encyclopedia, one that described a universe kept under infinite wraps of deception, a dimension of disguise.

It was only at the end of the dream that I saw the colors or colored shapes, molten and moving shapes. I cannot remember if I felt them to be anything specific or just abstract entities. They seemed to be the only things active within the moody immensity I stared out upon. Their motion somehow was not pleasant to watch—a bestial lurching of each color-mass, a legless pacing in a cage from which they might es-

cape at any moment. These phantasms introduced a degree of panic into the dream sufficient to wake me.

Oddly enough, though the dream had nothing to do with my roommate, I woke up calling his name repeatedly in my dream-distorted voice. But he did not answer the call, for he was not home at the time.

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I have reconstructed my nightmare at this point for two reasons. First, to show the character of my inner life during this time; second, to provide a context in which I could appreciate what I found the next day in Quinn's room.

When I returned from classes that afternoon, Quinn was nowhere to be seen, and I took this opportunity to research the nightmares that had been visiting our apartment in Nortown. Actually I did not have to pry very deeply into the near-fossilized clutter of Quinn's room. Almost immediately I spied on his desk something that made my investigation easier, this something being a spiral notebook with a cover of mock marble. Switching on the desk lamp in that darkly curtained room, I looked through the first few pages of the notebook. It seemed to be concerned with the sect Quinn had become associated with some weeks before, serving as a kind of spiritual diary. The entries were Quinn's meditations upon his inward evolution and employed an esoteric terminology which must remain largely undocumented, since the notebook is no longer in existence. Its pages, as I recall them, outlined Quinn's progress along a path of offbeat enlightenment, a tentative peering into what might have been merely symbolic realms.

Quinn seemed to have become one of a jaded philosophical society, a group of arcane deviates. Their *raison d'être* was a kind of mystical masochism, forcing initiates toward feats of occult dare-devilry—"glimpsing the inferno with eyes of ice," to take from the notebook a phrase that was repeated often and seemed a sort of chant of power. As I suspected, hallucinogenic drugs were used by the sect, and there was no doubt that they believed themselves communing with strange metaphysical venues. Their chief aim, in true mystical fashion, was to transcend common reality in the search for higher states of being, but their stratagem was highly unorthodox, a strange detour along the usual path toward positive illumination. Instead, they maintained a kind of blasphemous fatalism, a doomed determinism which brought them face to face with realms of obscure horror. Perhaps it was this very obscurity that allowed them the excitement of their central purpose, which seemed to be a precarious flirting with personal apocalypse, the striving for horrific dominion over horror itself.

Such was the subject matter of Quinn's notebook, all of it quite interesting. But the most intriguing entry was the last, which was brief and which I can recreate nearly in full. In this entry, like most of the others, Quinn addressed himself in the second person with various snatches of advice and admonishment. Much of it was unintelligible, for it seemed to be obsessed almost entirely with regions alien to the conscious mind. However, Quinn's words did have a certain curious meaning when I first read them, and more so later on. The following, then, exemplifies the manner of his notes to himself:

So far your progress has been faulty but inexorable. Last night you saw the zone and now know what it is like—wobbling glitter, a field of venomous colors, the glistening inner skin of deadliest nightshade. Now that you are actually nearing the plane of the zone, awake! Forget your dainty fantasies and learn to move like the eyeless beast you must become. Listen, feel, *smell* for the zone. Dream your way through its marvelous perils. You know what the things from there may do to you with *their* dreaming. Be aware. Do not stay in one place for very long these next few nights. This will be the strongest time. Get out (perhaps into the great night-light of Nortown)—wander, tramp, tread, somnambulate if you must. Stop and watch but not for very long. Be mindlessly cautious. Catch the entrancing fragrance of fear—and prevail.

I read this brief passage over and over, and each time its substance seemed to become less the fantasies of an overly imaginative sectarian and more a strange reflection on matters by now familiar to me. Thus, I seemed to be serving my purpose, for the sensitivity of my psyche had allowed a subtle link to Quinn's spiritual pursuits, even in their nuances of mood. And judging from the last entry in Quinn's notebook, the upcoming days were crucial in some way, the exact significance of which may have been entirely psychological. Nevertheless, other possibilities and hopes had crossed my mind. As it happened, the question was settled the following night over the course of only a few hours. This postmeridian adventure—somehow inevitably—took place amid the dreamy and debased nightlife of Nortown.

2.

Technically a suburb, at least by any civic definition, Nortown was not located outside the periphery of that larger city where Quinn and I attended the university, but entirely within its boundaries. For the near-indigent student, the sole attraction of this area is the inexpensive housing it offers in a variety of forms, even if the accommodations are not always the most appealing. However, in the case of Quinn and myself, the motives may have differed, for both of us were quite capable of appreciating the hidden properties and possibilities of the little city. Because of Nortown's peculiar proximity to the downtown area of a large urban center it absorbed much of the big city's lurid glamour, only on a smaller scale and in a concentrated way. Of course, there were a multitude of restaurants with bogusly exotic cuisines as well as a variety of nightspots of bizarre reputation and numerous establishments that existed in a twilight realm with regard to their legality.

But in addition to these second-rate epicurean attractions, Nortown also offered less earthly interests, however ludicrous the form they happened to take. The area seemed a kind of spawning ground for marginal people and movements. (I believe that Quinn's fellow sectarians—whoever they may have been—were either residents or habitués of the suburb.) Along Nortown's seven blocks or so of bustling commerce, one may see storefront invitations to personalized readings of the future or private lectures on the spiritual foci of the body. And if one looks up while walking down certain streets, there is a chance of spying second-floor windows with odd symbols pasted upon them, cryptic badges whose significance is known only to the initiated. In a way difficult to analyze, the mood of these streets was reminiscent of that

remarkable dream I have previously described—the sense of dim and disordered landscapes evoked by every sordid streetcorner of that city within a city.

Not the least of Nortown's inviting qualities is the simple fact that many of its businesses are active every hour of the day and night, which was probably one reason why Quinn's activities gravitated to this place. And now I knew of at least a few particular nights that he planned to spend treading Nortown's mottled sidewalks.

Quinn left the apartment just before dark. Through the window I watched him walk around to the front of the building and then proceed up the street toward Nortown's business district. I followed when he seemed a safe distance ahead of me. I supposed that if my plan to chart Quinn's movements for the evening was going to fail, it would do so in the next few minutes. Of course, it was reasonable to credit Quinn with an extra sense or two which would alert him to my scheme. All the same, I was not wrong to believe I was merely conforming to Quinn's unspoken wish for a spectator to his doom, a chronicler of his demonic quest. And everything proceeded smoothly as we arrived in the more heavily trafficked area of Nortown approaching Carton, the suburb's main street.

Up ahead, the high buildings of the surrounding metropolis towered around and above Nortown's lower structures. In the distance a pale sun had almost set, highlighting the peaks of the larger city's skyline. The valleyed enclave of Nortown now lay in this skyline's shadows, a dwarfish replica of the enveloping city. And this particular dwarf was of the colorfully clothed type suitable for entertaining jaded royalty. The main street flashed comic colors from an elec-

tric spectrum, dizzily hopping foot to foot in its attempt to conquer the nameless boredom of the crowds along the sidewalks. The milling throng—unusual for a chilly autumn evening—made it easier for me to remain inconspicuous, though more difficult to shadow Quinn.

I almost lost him for a moment when he left the ranks of some sluggish pedestrians and disappeared into a little drugstore on the north side of Carton. I stopped farther down the block and window-shopped for second-hand clothes until he came out onto the street again, which he did a few minutes later, holding a newspaper in one hand and stuffing a flat package of cigars inside his overcoat with the other. I saw him do this in the light flooding out of the drugstore windows, for by now it was nightfall.

Quinn walked a few more steps and then crossed at midstreet. I saw that his destination was only a restaurant with a semicircle of letters from the Greek alphabet painted on the front windows. Through the window I could see him take a seat at the counter inside and spread out his newspaper, ordering something from the waitress who stood with pad in hand. For at least a little while he would be easy to keep track of. Not that I simply wanted to observe Quinn go in and out of restaurants and drugstores the rest of the night. I had hoped that his movements would eventually become more revealing. But for the moment I was gaining practice at being his shadow.

I watched Quinn at his dinner from inside a Middle-Eastern import store located across the street from the restaurant. I could observe him easily through the store's front display window. Unfortunately I was the only patron of this musty place, and three times a bony, aged woman asked if

she could help me. “Just looking,” I said, taking my eyes from the window momentarily and glancing around at a collection of assorted trinkets and ersatz Arabiana. The woman eventually went and stood behind a merchandise counter, where she kept her right hand tenaciously out of view. For possibly no reason at all I was becoming very nervous among the engraved brass and ruggy smells of that store. I decided to return to the street, mingling along the crowded but strangely quiet sidewalks.

After about a half-hour, at approximately quarter to eight, Quinn came out of the restaurant. From down the street and on the opposite side I watched him fold up the newspaper he was carrying and neatly dispose of it in a nearby mailbox. Then, a recently lit cigar alternating between hand and mouth, he started north again. I let him walk half a block or so before I crossed the street and began tailing him once more. Although nothing manifestly unusual had yet occurred, there now seemed to be a certain promise of unknown happenings in the air of that autumn night.

Quinn continued on his way through the dingy neon of Nortown's streets. But he now seemed to have no specific destination. His stride was less purposeful than it had been, and he no longer looked expectantly before him but gawked aimlessly about the scene, as if these surroundings were unfamiliar or had altered in some way from the condition of previous visits. The overcoated and wild-haired figure of my roommate gave me the impression he was overwhelmed by something around him. He looked up toward the roof-ledges of buildings as though the full weight of the black autumn sky were about to descend. Absent-mindedly he nudged into

a few people and at some point lost hold of his cigar, scattering sparks across the sidewalk.

Quinn turned at the next corner, where Carton intersected with a minor sidestreet. There were only a few places alive with activity in this area, which led into the darker residential regions of Nortown. One of these places was a building with a stairway leading below the street level. From a safe position of surveillance I saw Quinn go down this stairway into what I assumed was a bar or coffeehouse of some sort. Innocent as it may have been, my imagination impulsively populated that cellar with patrons of fascinating diversity and strangeness. Suppressing my fantasies, I confronted the practical decision of whether or not to follow Quinn inside and risk shattering his illusion of a lonely mystic odyssey. I also speculated that perhaps he was meeting others in this place, and possibly I would end up following multiple cultists, penetrating their esoteric activities, such as they may have been. But after I had cautiously descended the stairway and peered through the smeary panes of the window there, I saw Quinn sitting in a distant corner… and he was alone.

"Like peeping in windows?" asked a voice behind me. "Windows are the eyes of the soulless," said another. This twosome looked very much like professors from the university, though not those familiar to me from the anthropology department. I followed these distinguished academics into the bar, thereby making a less obvious entrance than if I had gone in alone.

The place was dark and crowded and much larger than it looked from outside. I sat at a table by the door and at a strategic remove from Quinn, who was seated behind a half-wall

some distance away. The décor around me looked like that of an unfinished basement or a storage room. There were a great number of flea-market antiquities hanging from the walls, and dangling from the ceiling were long objects that resembled razor strops. After a few moments a rather vacant-looking girl walked over and stood silently near my table. I did not immediately notice that she was just a waitress, so unconvivial was her general appearance and manner.

At some point during the hour or so that I was allowed to sit there nursing my drink, I discovered that if I leaned forward as far as possible in my chair, I could catch a glimpse of Quinn on the other side of the half-wall. This tactic now revealed to me a Quinn in an even greater state of agitated wariness than before. I thought he would have settled down to a languid series of drinks, but he did not. In fact, there was a cup of coffee, not a glass of spirits, sitting at his elbow. Quinn seemed to be scrutinizing every inch of the room for something. His nervous glances once nearly focused on my own face, and from then on I became more discreet.

A little later on, not long before Quinn's and my exit, a girl with a guitar wandered up onto a platform against one wall of the room. As she made herself comfortable in a chair on the platform and tuned her instrument, someone switched on a single spotlight on the floor. I noticed that attached to the front of the spotlight was a movable disc divided into four sections: red, blue, green, and transparent. It was now adjusted to shine only through the transparent section.

The entertainer gave herself no introduction and started singing a song after lethargically strumming her guitar for a

moment or so. I did not recognize the piece, but I think any song would have sounded unfamiliar as rendered by this performer, whose voice compared in my imagination to that of a feeble-minded siren locked away somewhere and wailing pitifully to be set free. That the song was intended as mournful I could not doubt. It was, however, a very foreign and disorienting kind of mournfulness, as if the singer had eavesdropped on some exotic and grotesque rituals for her inspiration.

She finished the song. After receiving applause from only a single person somewhere in the room, she started into another number which sounded no different from the first. Then, about a minute or so into the weird progress of this second song, something happened—a moment of confusion—and seconds later I found myself back on the streets.

What happened was actually no more than some petty mischief. While the singer was calling feline-voiced to the lost love of the song's verses, someone sneaked up near the platform, grabbed the disc attached to the front of the spotlight, and gave it a spin. A wild kaleidoscope ensued. The swarming colors attacked the singer and those patrons at nearby tables. The singing continued, its languishing tempo off-sync with the speedy reds, blues, and greens. There was something menacing about the visual disorder of those colors gleefully swimming around. And then, for a brief moment, the colorful chaos was eclipsed when a silhouette hurriedly stumbled past, moving between my table and the singer on the platform. I almost missed seeing who it was, for my eyes were averted from the general scene. I let him make it out the door, which he seemed to have some trouble opening, before dashing from the place myself.

When I emerged from the stairway onto the sidewalk, I saw Quinn standing at the corner on Carton. As he paused to light a cigar, I kept my place in the shadows until he proceeded up the street.

We walked a few blocks that were profusely decorated with neon signs streaming across the night. I was diverted by the sequentially lit letters spelling out E-S-S-E-N-C-E LOUNGE, LOUNGE, LOUNGE; and I wondered what secrets were revealed to those anointed by the priestesses of MEDEA's MASSAGE.

Our next stop was a short one, though it also threatened the psychic rapport Quinn and I had been so long in establishing. Quinn entered a bar where a sign outside advertised for persons who desired work as professional dancers. I let a few moments pass before following Quinn into the place. But just as I stepped within the temporarily blinding darkness of the bar, someone shouldered me to one side in his haste to leave. Fortunately I was standing in a crowd of men waiting for seats inside, and Quinn did not seem to take note of me. In addition, his right hand—with cigar—was visoring his eyes or perhaps giving his brow a quick massage. In any case, he did not stop but charged past me and out the door. As I turned to follow him in his brusque exit, I noticed the scene within the bar, particularly focusing on a stage where a single figure gyred about—clothed in flashing colors. And gazing briefly on this chaotic image, I recalled that other flurrying chaos at the underground club, wondering if Quinn had been disturbed by this second confrontation with a many-hued phantasmagoria, this flickering and disorderly rainbow of dreams. Certainly he seemed to have been repulsed in some way, causing his furious exit. I exited more

calmly and resumed my chartings of Quinn's nocturnal voyage.

He next visited a number of places into which, for one reason or another, I was wary to follow. Included among these stops was a bookstore (not an occult one), a record shop with an outdoor speaker that blared madness into the street, and a lively amusement arcade, where Quinn remained for only the briefest moment. Between each of these diversions Quinn appeared to be getting progressively more, I cannot say *frantic*, but surely... watchful. His once steady stride was now interrupted by half-halts to glance into store windows, frequent hesitations that betrayed a multitude of indecisive thoughts and impulses, and a faltering uncertainty in general. His whole manner of movement had changed, its aspects of rhythm, pace, and gesture adding up to a character-image radically altered from his former self. At times I could even have doubted that this was Jack Quinn if it had not been for his unmistakable appearance.

Perhaps, I thought, he had become subliminally aware of someone being always at his back, and that, at this point in his plummet to an isolated hell, he no longer required a companion or could not tolerate a voyeur of his destiny. But ultimately I had to conclude that the cause of Quinn's disquiet was something other than a pair of footsteps trailing behind him. There was something else that he seemed to be seeking, searching out clues in the brick and neon landscape, possibly in some signal condition or circumstance from which he could derive guidance for his movements that frigid and fragrant October night. But I do not think he found, or could properly read, whatever sign it was he sought. Otherwise the consequences might have been different.

The reason for Quinn's lack of alertness had much to do with his penultimate stop that evening. The time was close to midnight. We had worked our way down Carton to the last block of Nortown's commercial area. Here, also, were the northern limits of the suburb, beyond which lay a stretch of condemned buildings belonging to the surrounding city. This part of the suburb was similarly blighted in ways both physical and atmospheric. On either side of the street stood a row of attached buildings whose height sometimes varied dramatically. Many of the businesses on this block were not equipped with outside lights or failed to employ the ones they had. But the lack of outward illumination seldom signified that these places were not open for business, at least judging by the comings and goings on the sidewalks outside the darkened shops, bars, small theaters, and other establishments. Casual pedestrian traffic at this end of the suburb had seemingly diminished to certain determined individuals of specific taste and destination. Street traffic too was reduced, and there was something about those few cars left parked at the curbs that gave them a look of abandonment, if not complete immobility.

Of course, I am sure those cars, or most of them, were capable of motion, and it was only the most pathetic of fallacies that caused one to view them as sentient things somehow debilitated by their broken-down surroundings. But I think I may have been dreaming on my feet for a few seconds: sounds and images seemed to come to me from places outside the immediate environment. I stared at an old building across the street—a bar, perhaps, or a nameless club of some exclusive membership—and for a moment I received the impression that it was sending out strange noises, not

from within its walls but from a far more distant source, as if it were transmitting from remote dimensions. And these noises had a visible aspect too, a kind of vibration in the night air, like static that one could see sparkling in the darkness. But all the while there was just an old building and nothing more than that. I stared a little longer and the noises faded into confused echoes, the sparkling became dull and disappeared, the connection lost, and the place fully resumed its decrepit reality.

The building looked much too intimate in size to afford concealment, and I perceived a certain privacy in its appearance that made me feel a newcomer would have been awkwardly noticeable. Quinn, however, had unhesitantly gone inside. I suppose it would have been helpful to observe him in there, to see what sort of familiarity he had with this establishment and its patrons. But all I know is that he remained in there for over an hour. During part of that time I waited at a counter stool in a diner down the street.

When Quinn finally came out he was observably drunk. This surprised me, because I had assumed that he intended to maintain the utmost control of his faculties that evening. The coffee I saw him drinking at that underground club seemed to support this assumption. But somehow Quinn's intentions to hold on to his sobriety, if he had such intentions to begin with, had been revised or forgotten.

I had positioned myself farther down the street by the time he reappeared, but there was much less need for caution now. It was ridiculously easy to remain unnoticed behind a Quinn who could barely see the pavement he walked upon. A police car with flashing lights passed us on Carton, and Quinn exhibited no awareness of it. He halted on the

sidewalk, but only to light another cigar. And he seemed to have a difficult time performing this task in a wind that turned his unbuttoned overcoat into a wild-winged cape flapping behind him. It was this wind, as much as Quinn himself, that led the way to our final stop where a few lights relieved the darkness on the very edge of Nortown.

The lights were those of a theater marquee. And it was also here that we caught up with the revolving beacons of the patrol car. Behind it was another vehicle, a large luxury affair that had a deep gash in its shiny side. Not far away along the curb was a No Parking sign that was creased into an L shape. A tall policeman was inspecting the damaged city property, while the owner of the car that had apparently done the deed was standing by. Quinn gave only a passing glance at this tableau as he proceeded into the theater. A few moments later I followed him, but not before hearing the owner of that disfigured car tell the patrolman that something brightly colored had suddenly appeared in his headlights, causing him to swerve. And whatever it was had subsequently vanished.

Stepping into the lobby of the theater, I noted that it must have been a place of baroque elegance in former days, though now the outlines of the scrolled molding above were blurred by grayish sediment and the enormous chandelier was missing some of its parts and all of its glitter. The glass counter on my right, which no doubt was once filled with boxes of candy and such, had been converted, probably long ago, into a merchandise stand displaying pornographic magazines.

I walked through one of a long line of doors and stood around for a while in the hallway behind the auditorium.

Here a group of men were talking and smoking, dropping their cigarettes onto the floor and stepping them out. Their voices almost drowned out the soundtrack of the film that was being shown, the sound emanating from the aisle entrances and humming unintelligibly in the back walls. I looked into the film-lit auditorium and saw only a few moviegoers scattered here and there in the worn seats of the theater, mostly sitting by themselves. By the light of the film I located Quinn within the sparse audience. He was sitting very close to the screen in a front-row seat next to some curtains and an exit sign.

He seemed to be dozing in his seat rather than watching the film, and I found it a simple matter to position myself a few rows behind him. By that time Quinn appeared to have lost what was left of his earlier resolve and intensity, and the momentum of that night had all but run out. In the darkness of the theater I began to nod and then fell asleep, much as it seemed Quinn had already done.

I did not sleep for long, no more than a few minutes. But during that time I dreamed. However, there was no nightmarish scenery in this dream, no threatening scenarios. Only darkness... darkness and a voice. The voice was that of Quinn. He was calling out to me from a great distance, a distance that did not seem a matter of physical space but one of immeasurable and alien dimensions. His words were distorted, as if passing through some medium that was misshaping them, turning human sounds into a beastlike rasping—the half-choking and half-shrieking voice of something in the process of being slowly and methodically wounded. First he called my name several times in the wild modulations of a coarse scream. Then he said, as well as I can remember:

“Stopped watching for them... fell into their zone... where are you... help us... they're dreaming, too... they're dreaming... and shaping things with their dreams.”

I awoke and the first thing I saw was what seemed a great shapeless mass of colors, which was only the giant images of the film. My eyes focused, and I looked down the rows toward Quinn. He seemed to be slumped over, hunching down, the top of his head much too near his shoulders. A mound of movement struggled on the other side of his seat, emerging sideways into the aisle. It was Quinn, but he was now faintly luminous and diminished in size. The bottom of his overcoat dragged along the floor, its sleeves hanging loose and handless, its collar caving in. The thing fought to take each awkward step, as if it did not have full control of its motion, like a marionette jerking this way and that way as it labored forth. Its glow seemed to be gaining in radiance now, a pulsing opalescent aura that crawled or flowed all around the lumbering dwarf.

I might still be in a dream, I reminded myself. Or this might be a distorted after-vision, a delirious blend of images derived from nightmare, imagination, and that enormous stain of colors at the front of the dark auditorium in which I had just awakened. I tried to collect myself, to focus on the thing that was disappearing behind the thick curtain beneath the lighted exit sign.

I followed, passing through the opening in the frayed, velvety curtain. Beyond it was a cement stairway leading up to a metal door that was now swinging closed. Halfway up the stairs I saw a familiar shoe which must have been lost in Quinn's frantic yet retarded haste. Where was he running and from what? These were my only thoughts now, without

consideration of the pure strangeness of the situation. I had abandoned all connections to any guiding set of norms by which to judge reality or unreality. However, all that was needed to shatter this acceptance waited outside—something of total unacceptability atop a rickety scaffold of estrangement. After I stepped out the door at the top of the stairs, I discovered that the previous events of that night had only served as a springboard into other realms, a point of departure from a world now diminishing with a furious velocity behind me.

The area outside the theater was unlit but nonetheless was not dark. Something was shining in a long narrow passageway between the theater and an adjacent building. This was where Quinn had gone. Illumination was there, and sounds.

From around the corner's edge a grotesque light was trickling out, the first intimations of an ominous sunrise over a dark horizon. I dimly recognized this wavering light, though not from my waking memory. It grew more intense, now pouring out in weird streams from beyond the solid margin of the building. And the more intense it grew, the more clearly I could hear the screaming voice that had called out to me in a dream. I shouted his name, but the swelling, chromatic brilliance was a field of fear which kept me from making any move in its direction. What repelled me appeared as a rainbow in which all natural color had been mutated into a painfully lush iridescence by some prism fantastically corrupted in its form. It was an aurora painting the darkness with a shimmering blaze that did not belong to this world. And, in actuality, it was nothing like these figurative effusions, which are merely a feeble means of partially

fixing a reality incommunicable to those not initiated to it, a necessary resorting to the makeshift gibberish of the mystic isolated by his experience and left without a language to describe it.

The entire episode was temporally rather brief, though its phantasmagoric quality made it seem of indefinite duration—the blink of an eye or an eon. Suddenly the brightness ceased flowing out toward me, as if some strange spigot had been abruptly turned off somewhere. The screaming had also stopped. With all caution, I stepped into the passageway I had seen Quinn enter. But nothing was there—nothing to relieve my sense of confusion as to what exactly had happened. (Though not a dilettante of the unreal, I have had my moments of dazed astonishment.) But perhaps there was one thing. On the ground was a burnt-out patch of earth, a shapeless and bare spot that was deprived of the weeds and litter that covered the surrounding area. Possibly it was only a place from which some object had recently been removed, spirited off, leaving the earth beneath it vacant and dead. For a moment, when I first looked at the spot, it seemed to twinkle with a faint luminosity. Possibly I only imagined its outline as being that of a human silhouette, though one contorted in such a way that it might also have been mistaken for other things, other shapes. In any case, whatever had been there was now gone.

And around this barren little swatch of ground was only trash: newspapers mutilated by time and the elements; brown bags reduced by decay to their primal pulp; thousands of cigarette butts; and one item of debris that was almost new and had yet to have any transformations worked

upon it. It was a thin book-like box. I picked it up. There were still two fresh cigars in it.

3.

Quinn never returned to the apartment we shared. After a few days I reported him as missing to the Nortown police. Before doing this I destroyed the notebook in his room, for in a fit of paranoia I thought the police would find it in the course of their investigations and then ask some rather uncomfortable questions. I did not want to explain to them things that they simply would not believe, especially activities indulged in that final night. This would only have erroneously cast suspicion upon myself. Fortunately, the Nortown authorities are notoriously lax in their official functions. As it turned out, they asked very few questions and never came to the apartment.

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After Quinn's disappearance I immediately began looking for another place to live. And although my roommate was gone, strange dreams continued during my last days at the old residence. But these dreams were different in some particulars. The general backdrop was much the same nightmare expanse, but now I viewed it from a distance outside the dream. It was actually more like watching a film than dreaming, and in a way they did not seem to be my own dreams at all. I considered these to be Quinn's leftover visions still haunting the apartment, for he always played their central role. Perhaps it was in these dreams that I continued to follow Quinn beyond the point at which I lost him. For at

that point I imagined him as already starting to change, and in my last dreams he changed further.

He no longer bore any resemblance to my former roommate, though with dreamlike omniscience I knew it was he. His shape kept changing, or rather was deliberately being changed by those kaleidoscopic beasts. Playing out a scene from some Boschian hell, the tormenting demons encircled their victim and were *dreaming* him. They carried him through a hideous series of transfigurations, maliciously altering the screaming mass of a damned soul. They were dreaming things out of him and dreaming things into him. Finally, the purpose of their transformations became apparent. They were torturing their victim through a number of stages which would ultimately result in his becoming one of them, fulfilling his most fearful and obsessive vision. I no longer recognized him but saw that there was now one more glittering beast that took its place with the others and frolicked among them.

This was the last dream I had before leaving the apartment. There have been no others since, at least none that have troubled my own sleep. I cannot say the same for that of my new roommate, who rages in his slumber night after night in the shabby, and quite reasonably priced, little place where we reside. Once or twice he has attempted to communicate to me his strange visions and the company into which they have led him. But I affect only the slightest interest in his adventures. For as a student of anthropology, one of the few of my kind, I must keep a certain distance from my subjects. They are of a rare type, and outright intimacy tends to impact their behavior in ways that could spoil my study of them. In any case, companionship is not what these adven-

turers in an alternative existence seek. What they desire, like Jack Quinn, are witnesses to their downfall as they plummet into an abyss of nightmares. What they want are chroniclers of their explorations in a hell of their own choosing. And in these roles I am more than willing to accommodate them, for their desires and mine are complementary. Nevertheless, I sometimes feel a tinge of guilt on my side. In truth, I am a parasite who lives off a malady that afflicts them while I remain immune. And the part I play is that of a voyeur. For it is within my power to save them. If only I were moved to do so, I could hold out my hand to them as they hover over the pit. I can only wonder, then, what is the sickness from which I suffer that, like some depraved deity, I elect to let them fall.

The Dreaming In Nortown (1991 Grimscribe Version)

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1

There are those who require witnesses to their doom. Not content with a solitary perdition, they seek an audience worthy of the spectacle—a mind to remember the stages of their downfall or perhaps only a mirror to multiply their abject glory. Of course, other motives may figure in this scheme, ones far too tenuous and strange for mortal reminiscence. Yet there exists a memoir of dreams in which I may recall an old acquaintance by the name of Jack Quinn (an alias that closely echoes nymic truth). For it was he who sensed my peculiar powers of sympathy and, employing a rather contrary stratagem, engaged them. This all began, according to my perspective, late one night in the decaying and spacious apartment which Quinn and I shared and which was located in that city—or, more precisely, in a certain region within it—where we attended the same university.

I was asleep. In the darkness a voice was calling me away from my ill-mapped world of dreams. Then something heavy weighed down the edge of the mattress and a slightly infernal aroma filled the room, an acrid combination of tobacco and autumn nights. A small red glow wandered in an arc toward the apex of the seated figure and there glowed even brighter, faintly lighting the lower part of a face. Quinn

was smiling, the cigar in his mouth smoking in the darkness. He remained silent for a moment and crossed his legs beneath his long threadbare overcoat, an ancient thing that was wrapped loosely around him like a skin about to be sloughed. So many pungent Octobers were collected in that coat. It is the events of this month that I am remembering.

I assumed he was drunk, or perhaps still in the remote heights or depths of the artificial paradise he had been exploring that night. When Quinn finally spoke, it was definitely with the stumbling words of a returning explorer, a stuporous and vaguely awed voice. But he seemed more than simply drug-entranced.

He had attended a meeting, he said, speaking the word in an odd way which seemed to expand its significance. Of course there were others at this gathering, people who to me remained simply “those others”. It was a kind of philosophical society, he told me. The group sounded colourful enough: midnight assemblies, the probable use of drugs, and participants in the grip of strange mystical ecstasies.

I got out of bed and switched on the light. Quinn was a chaotic sight, his clothes more crumpled than usual, his face flushed, and his long red hair intricately tangled.

“And exactly where did you go tonight?” I asked with the measure of true curiosity he seemed to be seeking. I had the distinct idea that Quinn's activities of that evening had occured in the vicinity of Nortown (another pseudonym, of course, as are all the names in this narrative), where the apartment we shared was located. I asked him if they had.

“And perhaps in other places,” he answered, laughing a little to himself as he meditated upon the gray end of his ci-

gar. “But you might not understand. Excuse me, I have to go to bed.”

“As you wish,” I replied, leaving aside all complaints about this nocturnal intrusion. He puffed on his cigar and went to his room, closing the door behind him.

This, then, was the beginning of Quinn's ultimate phase of esoteric development. And until the final night, I actually saw very little of him during that most decisive episode of his life. We were pursuing different courses of study in our graduate school days I in anthropology and he in... it troubles me to say I was never entirely sure of his academic program. In any case, our respective timetables seldom intersected. Nonetheless, Quinn's daily movements, at least the few I was aware of, did invite curiosity. There was a general tenor of chaos that I perceived in his behavior, a quality which may or may not make for good company but which always offers promise of the extraordinary.

He continued to come in quite late at night, always entering the apartment with what seemed a contrived noisiness. After that first night he did not overtly confide his activities to me. The door to his room would close, and immediately afterward I would hear him collapse on the old springs of his mattress. It seemed he did not undress for bed, perhaps never even removed the overcoat which was becoming shabbier and more crumpled day by day.

My sleep temporarily shattered, I passed this wakeful time by eavesdropping on the noises in the next room. There was a strange catalogue of sounds which either I had never noticed before or which were somehow different from the usual nightly din: low moans emanating from the most shadowy chasms of dream; sudden intakes of breath like the

suction of a startled gasp; and abrupt snarls and snorts of a bestial timbre. The whole rhythm of his sleep betrayed expressions of unknown turmoil. And sometimes he would violate the calm darkness of the night with a series of stacatto groans followed by a brief vocal siren that made me bolt up suddenly in my bed. This alarming sound surely carried the entire audible spectrum of nightmare-inspired terror… but there were also mingling overtones of awe and ecstasy, a willing submission to some unknown ordeal.

"Have you finally died and gone to hell?" I shouted one night through his bedroom door. The sound was still ringing in my ears.

"Go back to sleep," he answered, his low-pitched voice still speaking from the deeper registers of somnolence. The smell of a freshly lit cigar then filtered out of his bedroom.

After these late-night disturbances, I would sometimes sit up to watch the dull colors of dawn stirring in the distance outside my eastern window. And as the weeks went by that October, the carnival of noise going on in the next room began to work its strange influence upon my own sleep. Soon Quinn was not the only one in the apartment having nightmares, as I was inundated by a flood of eidetic horrors that left only a vague residue upon waking.

It was throughout the day that fleeting scenes of nightmare would suddenly appear to my mind, brief and vivid, as though I had mistakenly opened a strange door somewhere and, after inadvertently seeing something I should not have, quickly closed it once again with a reverberating slam. Eventually, however, my dream-censor himself fell asleep, and I recalled in total the elusive materials of one of those night-

visions, which returned to me painted in scenes of garishly vibrant colors.

The dream took place at a small public library in Nortown where I sometimes retreated to study. On the oneiric plane, however, I was not a studious patron of the library but one of the librarians—the only one, it seemed, keeping vigil in that desolate institution. I was just sitting there, complacently surveying the shelves of books and laboring under the illusion that in my idleness I was performing some routine but very important function. This did not continue very long—nothing does in dreams—though the situation was one that already seemed interminable.

What shattered the status quo, initiating a new phase to the dream, was my discovery that a note scrawled upon a slip of paper had been left on the well-ordered surface of my desk. It was a request for a book and had been submitted by a library patron whose identity I puzzled over, for I had not seen anyone put it there. I fretted about this scrap of paper for many dream-moments: had it been there even before I sat down at the desk and had I simply overlooked it? I suffered a disproportionate anxiety over this possible dereliction. The imagined threat of a reprimand of some strange nature terrorized me. Without delay I phoned the back room to have the person on duty there bring forth the book. But I was truly alone in that dream library and no one answered what was to my mind now an emergency appeal. Feeling a sense of urgency in the face of some imaginary deadline, and filled with a kind of exalted terror, I snatched up the request slip and set out to retrieve the book myself.

In the stacks I saw that the telephone line was dead, for it had been ripped from the wall and lay upon the floor like the

frayed end of a disciplinary whip. Trembling, I consulted the piece of paper I carried with me for the title of the book and call-number. No longer can I remember that title, but it definitely had something to do with the name of the city, suburb of a sort, where Quinn's and my apartment was located. I proceeded to walk down a seemingly endless aisle flanked by innumerable smaller aisles between the lofty bookshelves. Indeed, they were so lofty that when I finally reached my destination I had to climb a high ladder to reach the spot where I could secure the desired book. Mounting the ladder until my shaking hands gripped the highest rung, I was at eye level with the exact call-number I was seeking, or some forgotten dream-glyphs which I took to be these letters and digits. And like these symbols, the book I found is now hopelessly unmemorable, its shape, color, and dimensions having perished on the journey back from the dream. I may have even dropped the book, but that was not important.

What was important, however, was the dark little slot created when I withdrew the book from its rank on the shelf. I peered in, somehow knowing I was supposed to do this as part of the book-retrieving ritual. I gazed deeper… and the next phase of the dream began.

The slot was a window, perhaps more of a crack in some dream-wall or a slit in the billowing membrane that protects one world against the intrusion of another. Beyond was something of a landscape—for lack of a more suitable term—which I viewed through a narrow rectangular frame. But this landscape had no earth and sky that hinged together in a neat line at the horizon, no floating or shining objects above to echo and balance their earthbound countershapes below. This landscape was an infinite expanse of depth and

distance, a never-ending morass deprived of all coherence, a state of strange existence rather than a chartable locus, having no more geographical extension than a mirage or a rainbow. There was definitely something before my vision, elements that could be distinguished from one another but impossible to fix in any kind of relationship. I experienced a prolonged gaze at what is usually just a delirious glimpse, the way one might suddenly perceive some sidelong illusion which disappears at the turn of the head, leaving no memory of what the mind had deceptively seen.

The only way I can describe the visions I witnessed with even faint approximation is in terms of other scenes which might arouse similar impressions of tortuous chaos: perhaps a festival of colors twisting in blackness, a tentacled abyss that alternately seems to glisten moistly as with some horrendous dew, then suddenly dulls into an arid glow, like bone-colored stars shining over an extraterrestrial desert. The vista of eerie disorder that I observed was further abetted in its strangeness by my own feelings about it. They were magnified dream-feelings, those encyclopedic emotions which involve complexities of intuition, sensation, and knowledge impossible to express. My dream-emotion was indeed a monstrous encyclopedia, one that described a universe kept under infinite wraps of deception, a dimension of disguise.

It was only at the end of the dream that I saw the colors or colored shapes, molten and moving shapes. I cannot remember if I felt them to be anything specific or just abstract entities. They seemed to be the only things active within the moody immensity I stared out upon. Their motion somehow was not pleasant to watch—a bestial lurching of each color-

mass, a legless pacing in a cage from which they might escape at any moment. These phantasms introduced a degree of panic into the dream sufficient to wake me.

Oddly enough, though the dream had nothing to do with my roommate, I woke up calling his name repeatedly in my dream-distorted voice. But he did not answer the call, for he was not home at the time.

I have reconstructed my nightmare at this point for two reasons. First, to show the character of my inner life during this time; second, to provide a context in which to appreciate what I found the next day in Quinn's room.

When I returned from classes that afternoon, Quinn was nowhere to be seen, and I took this opportunity to research the nightmares that had been visiting our apartment in Nortown. Actually I did not have to pry very deeply into the near-fossilized clutter of Quinn's room. Almost immediately I spied on his desk something that made my investigation easier, this something being a spiral notebook with a cover of mock marble. Switching on the desklamp in that darkly curtained room, I looked through the first few pages of the notebook. It seemed to be concerned with the sect Quinn had become associated with some weeks before, serving as a kind of spiritual diary. The entries were Quinn's meditations upon his inward evolution and employed an esoteric terminology which must remain largely undocumented, since the notebook is no longer in existence. Its pages, as I recall them, outlined Quinn's progress along a path of offbeat enlightenment, a tentative peering into what might have been merely symbolic realms.

Quinn seemed to have become one of a jaded philosophical society, a group of arcane deviates. Their raison d'etre

was a kind of mystical masochism, forcing initiates toward feats of occult dare-devilry-“glimpsing the inferno with eyes of ice”, to take from the notebook a phrase that was repeated often and seemed a sort of chant of power. As I suspected, hallucinogenic drugs were used by the sect, and there was no doubt that they believed themselves communing with strange metaphysical venues. Their chief aim, in true mystical fashion, was to transcend common reality in the search for higher states of being, but their stratagem was highly unorthodox, a strange detour along the usual path toward positive illumination. Instead, they maintained a kind of blasphemous fatalism, a doomed determinism which brought them face to face with realms of obscure horror. Perhaps it was this very obscurity that allowed them the excitement of their central purpose, which seemed to be a precarious flirting with personal apocalypse, the striving for horrific dominion over horror itself.

Such was the subject matter of Quinn's notebook, all of it quite interesting. But the most intriguing entry was the last, which was brief and which I can recreate nearly in full. In this entry, like most of the others, Quinn addressed himself in the second person with various snatches of advice and admonishment. Much of it was unintelligible, for it seemed to be obsessed almost entirely with regions alien to the conscious mind. However, Quinn's words did have a certain curious meaning when I first read them, and more so later on. The following, then, exemplifies the manner of his notes to himself:

> So far your progress has been faulty but inexorable. Last night you saw the zone and now know what it is like-wobbling glitter, a field of colorous venoms, the

> glistening inner skin of deadliest nightshade. Now that you are actually nearing the plane of the zone, awake! Forget your dainty fantasies and learn to move like the eyeless beast you must become. Listen, feel, smell for the zone. Dream your way through its marvelous perils. You know what the things from there may do to you with their dreaming. Be aware. Do not stay in one place for very long these next few nights. This will be the strongest time. Get out (perhaps into the great night-light of Nortown) wander, tramp, tread, somnambulate if you must. Stop and watch but not for very long. Be mindlessly cautious. Catch the entrancing fragrance of fear and prevail.

I read this several times, and each time its substance seemed to become less the “fantasies” of an overly imaginative sectarian and more a strange reflection of matters by now familiar to me. Thus, I seemed to be serving my purpose, for the sensitivity of my psyche had allowed a subtle link to Quinn's spiritual pursuits, even in their nuances of mood. And judging from the last entry in Quinn's notebook, the upcoming days were crucial in some way, the exact significance of which may have been entirely psychological. Nevertheless, other possibilities and hopes had crossed my mind. As it happened, the question was settled the following night over the course of only a few hours. This post-meridian adventure—somehow inevitably—took place amid the dreamy and debased nightlife of Nortown.

Of course, Nortown has never really been considered a suburb, for its city limits lie not somewhere on the periphery of that larger city where Quinn and I attended the university, but entirely within its boundaries. For the near-indigent student the sole attraction of this area is the inexpensive housing it offers in a variety of forms, even if the accommodations are not always the most appealing. However, in the case of Quinn and myself, the motives may have differed, for both of us were quite capable of appreciating the hidden properties and possibilities of the little city. Because of Nortown's peculiar proximity to the downtown area of a large urban center it absorbed much of the big city's lurid glamor, only on a smaller scale and in a concentrated way. Of course, there were a multitude of restaurants with bogusly exotic cuisines as well as a variety of nightspots of bizarre reputation and numerous establishments that existed in a twilight realm with regard to their legality.

But in addition to these second-rate epicurean attractions, Nortown also offered less earthly interests, however ludicrous the form they happened to take. The area seemed a kind of spawning ground for marginal people and movements. (I believe that Quinn's fellow sectarians—whoever they may have been—were either residents or habitues of the suburb.) Along Nortown's seven blocks or so of bustling commerce, one may see storefront invitations to personalized readings of the future or private lectures on the spiritual foci of the body. And if one looks up while walking down certain streets, there is a chance of spying second-floor windows with odd symbols pasted upon them, cryptic badges whose significance is known only to the initiated. In a way difficult to analyze, the mood of these streets was reminiscent of that

remarkable dream I have previously described—the sense of dim and disordered landscapes was evoked by every sordid streetcorner of that city within a city.

Not the least of Nortown's inviting qualities is the simple fact that many of its businesses are active every hour of the day and night. Which was probably one reason why Quinn's activities gravitated to this place. And now I knew of at least a few particular nights that he planned to spend treading the sidewalks of Nortown.

Quinn left the apartment just before dark. Through the window I watched him walk around to the front of the building and then proceed up the street toward Nortown's business district. I followed when he seemed a safe distance ahead of me. I supposed that if my plan to chart Quinn's movements for the evening was going to fail, it would do so in the next new minutes. Of course, it was reasonable to credit Quinn with an extra sense or two which would alert him to my scheme. All the same, I was not wrong to believe I was merely conforming to Quinn's unspoken wish for a spectator to his doom, a chronicler of his demonic quest. And everything proceeded smoothly as we arrived in the more heavily trafficked area of Nortown, approaching Carton, the suburb's main street.

Up ahead, the high buildings of the surrounding metropolis towered behind and above Nortown's lower structures. In the distance a pale sun had almost set, highlighting the peaks of the larger city's skyline. The valleyed enclave of Nortown now lay in this skyline's shadows, a dwarfish replica of the enveloping city. And this particular dwarf was of the colorfully clothed type suitable for entertaining jaded royalty; the main street flashed comic colors from an electric

spectrum, dizzily hopping foot to foot in its attempt to conquer the nameless boredom of the crowds along the sidewalks. The milling crowds—unusual for a chilly autumn evening—made it easier for me to remain inconspicuous, though more difficult to shadow Quinn.

I almost lost him for a moment when he left the ranks of some sluggish pedestrians and disappeared into a little drugstore on the north side of Carton. I stopped farther down the block and window-shopped for second-hand clothes until he came out onto the street again. Which he did a few minutes later, holding a newspaper in one hand and stuffing a flat package of cigars inside his overcoat with the other. I saw him do this in the light flooding out of the drugstore windows, for by now it was nightfall.

Quinn walked a few more steps and then crossed at midstreet. I saw that his destination was only a restaurant with a semi-circle of letters from the Greek alphabet painted on the front windows. Through the window I could see him take a seat at the counter inside and spread out his newspaper, ordering something from the waitress who stood with pad in hand. For at least a little while he would be easy to keep track of. Not that I simply wanted to observe Quinn go in and out of restaurants and drugstores the rest of the night. I had hoped that his movements would eventually become more revealing. But for the moment I was gaining practice at being his shadow.

I watched Quinn at his dinner from inside a Middle-Eastern import store located across the street from the restaurant. I could observe him easily through the store's front display window. Unfortunately I was the only patron of this musty place, and three times a bony, aged woman asked if

she could help me. “Just looking,” I said, taking my eyes from the window momentarily and glancing around at a collection of assorted trinkets and ersatz Arabiana. The woman eventually went and stood behind a merchandise counter, where she kept her right hand tenaciously out of view. For possibly no reason at all I was becoming very nervous among the engraved brass and ruggy smells of that store. I decided to return to the street, mingling along the crowded but strangely quiet sidewalks.

After about a half-hour, at approximately quarter to eight, Quinn came out of the restaurant. From down the street and on the opposite side I watched him fold up the newspaper he was carrying and neatly dispose of it in a nearby mailbox. Then, a recently lit cigar alternating between hand and mouth, he started north again. I let him walk half a block or so before I crossed the street and began tailing him once more. Although nothing manifestly unusual had yet occured, there now seemed to be a certain promise of unknown happenings in the air of that autumn night.

Quinn continued on his way through the dingy neon of Nortown's streets. But he now seemed to have no specific destination. His stride was less purposeful than it had been; he no longer looked expectantly before him but gawked aimlessly about the scene, as if these surroundings were unfamiliar or had altered in some way from the condition of previous visits. The overcoated and wild-haired figure of my roommate gave me the impression he was overwhelmed by something around him. He looked up toward the roof-ledges of buildings as though the full weight of the black autumn sky were about to descend. Absent-mindedly he nudged into

a few people and at some point lost hold of his cigar, scattering sparks across the sidewalk.

Quinn turned at the next corner, where Carton intersected with a minor sidestreet. There were only a few places alive with activity in this area, which led into the darker residential regions of Nortown. One of these places was a building with a stairway leading below the street level. From a safe position of surveillance I saw Quinn go down this stairway into what I assumed was a bar or coffee house of some sort. Innocent as it may have been, my imagination impulsively populated that cellar with patrons of fascinating diversity and strangeness. Suppressing my fantasies, I confronted the practical decision of whether or not to follow Quinn inside and risk shattering his illusion of a lonely mystic odyssey. I also speculated that perhaps he was meeting others in this place, and possibly I would end up following multiple cultists, penetrating their esoteric activities, such as they may have been. But after I had cautiously descended the stairway and peered through the smeary panes of the window there, I saw Quinn sitting in a distant corner… and he was alone.

"Like peeping in windows?" asked a voice behind me.

"Windows are the eyes of the soulless," said another. This twosome looked very much like professors from the university, though not those familiar to me from the anthropology department. I followed these distinguished academics into the bar, thereby making a less obvious entrance than if I had gone in alone.

The place was dark and crowded and much larger than it looked from outside. I sat at a table by the door and at a strategic remove from Quinn, who was seated behind a half-wall

some distance away. The decor around me looked like that of an unfinished basement or a storage room. There were a great number of flea-market antiquities hanging from the walls, and dangling from the ceiling were long objects that resembled razor strops. After a few moments a rather vacant-looking girl walked over and stood silently near my table. I did not immediately notice that she was just a waitress, so unconvivial was her general appearance and manner.

At some point during the hour or so that I was allowed to sit there nursing my drink, I discovered that if I leaned forward as far as possible in my chair, I could catch a glimpse of Quinn on the other side of the half-wall. This tactic now revealed to me a Quinn in an even greater state of agitated wariness than before. I thought he would have settled down to a languid series of drinks, but he did not. In fact, there was a cup of coffee, not liquor, sitting at his elbow. Quinn seemed to be scrutinizing every inch of the room for something. His nervous glances once nearly focused on my own face, and from then on I became more discreet.

A little later on, not long before Quinn's and my exit, a girl with a guitar wandered up onto a platform against one wall of the room. As she made herself comfortable in a chair on the platform and tuned her guitar, someone switched on a single spotlight on the floor. I noticed that attached to the front of the spotlight was a movable disc divided into four sections: red, blue, green, and transparent. It was now adjusted to shine only through the transparent section.

The entertainer gave herself no introduction and started singing a song after lethargically strumming her guitar for a moment or so. I did not recognize the piece, but I think any

song would have sounded strange as rendered by that girl's voice. It was the gloomy and unstudied voice of a feeble-minded siren locked away somewhere and wailing pitifully to be set free. That the song was intended as mournful I could not doubt. It was, however, a very foreign and disorienting kind of mournfulness, as if the singer had eavesdropped on some exotic and grotesque rituals for her inspiration.

She finished the song. After receiving applause from only a single person somewhere in the room, she started into another number which sounded no different from the first. Then, about a minute or so into the weird progress of this second song, something happened—a moment of confusion—and seconds later I found myself back on the streets.

What happened was actually no more than some petty mischief. While the singer was calling feline-like to the lost love of the song's verses, someone sneaked up near the platform, grabbed the disc attached to the front of the spotlight, and gave it a spin. A wild kaleidoscope ensued; the swarming colors attacked the singer and those patrons at nearby tables. The singing continued, its languishing tempo off-sync with the speedy reds, blues, and greens. There was something menacing about the visual disorder of those colors gleefully swimming around. And then, for a brief moment, the colorful chaos was eclipsed when a silhouette hurriedly stumbled past, moving between my table and the singer on the platform. I almost missed seeing who it was, for my eyes were averted from the general scene. I let him make it out the door, which he seemed to have some trouble opening, before dashing from the place myself.

When I emerged from the stairway onto the sidewalk, I saw Quinn standing at the corner on Carton. He had paused to light a cigar, rather frenetically striking several matches that would not stay lit in the autumn wind. I kept my place in the shadows until he proceeded on his way up the street.

We walked a few blocks, brief in length but ponderously decorated with neon signs streaming across the night. I was diverted by the sequentially lit letters spelling out E-S-S-E-N-C-E LOUNGE, LOUNGE, LOUNGE; and I wondered what secrets were revealed to those anointed by the priestesses of Medea's Massage.

Our next stop was a short one, though it also threatened the psychic rapport Quinn and I had been so long in establishing. Quinn entered a bar where a sign outside advertised for persons who desired work as professional dancers. I let a few moments pass before following Quinn into the place. But just as I stepped within the temporarily blinding darkness of the bar, someone shouldered me to one side in his haste to leave. Fortunately I was standing in a crowd of men waiting for seats inside, and Quinn did not seem to take note of me. In addition, his right hand—with cigar—was visoring his eyes or perhaps giving his brow a quick massage. In any case, he did not stop but charged past me and out the door. As I turned to follow him in his brusque exit, I noticed the scene within the bar, particularly focusing on a stage where a single figure gyred about—clothed in flashing colors. And gazing briefly on this chaotic image, I recalled that other flurrying chaos at the underground club, wondering if Quinn had been disturbed by this second confrontation with a many-hued phantasmagoria, this flickering and disorderly rainbow of dreams. Certainly he seemed to have been re-

pulsed in some way, causing his furious exit. I exited more calmly and resumed my chartings of Quinn's nocturnal voyage.

He next visited a number of places into which, for one reason or another, I was wary to follow. Included among these stops was a bookstore (not an occult one), a record shop with an outdoor speaker that blared madness into the street, and a lively amusement arcade, where Quinn remained for only the briefest moment. Between each of these diversions Quinn appeared to be getting progressively more, I cannot say frantic, but surely... watchful. His once steady stride was now interrupted by half-halts to glance into store windows, frequent hesitations that betrayed a multitude of indecisive thoughts and impulses, a faltering uncertainty in general. His whole manner of movement had changed, its aspects of rhythm, pace, and gesture adding up to a character-image radically altered from his former self. At times I could even have doubted that this was Jack Quinn if it had not been for his unmistakable appearance.

Perhaps, I thought, he had become subliminally aware of someone being always at his back, and that, at this point in his plummet to an isolated hell, he no longer required a companion or could not tolerate a voyeur of his destiny. But ultimately I had to conclude that the cause of Quinn's disquiet was something other than a pair of footsteps trailing behind him. There was something else that he seemed to be seeking, searching out clues in the brick and neon landscape, possibly in some signal condition or circumstance from which he could derive guidance for his movements that frigid and fragrant October night. But I do not think he found, or could

properly read, whatever sign it was he sought. Otherwise the consequences might have been different.

The reason for Quinn's lack of alertness had much to do with his penultimate stop that evening. The time was close to midnight. We had worked our way down Carton to the last block of Nortown's commercial area. Here, also, were the northern limits of the suburb, beyond which lay a stretch of condemned buildings belonging to the surrounding city. This part of the suburb was similarly blighted in ways both physical and atmospheric. On either side of the street stood a row of attached buildings of sometimes dramatically varying height. Many of the businesses on this block were equipped with no outside lights or were not using the ones they had. But the lack of outward illumination seldom signified that these places were not open for business, at least judging by the comings and goings on the sidewalks outside the darkened shops, bars, small theaters, and other establishments. Casual pedestrian traffic at this end of the suburb had seemingly diminished to certain determined individuals of specific taste and destination. Street traffic too was reduced, and there was something about those few cars left parked at the curbs that gave them a look of abandonment, if not complete immobility.

Of course, I am sure those cars, or most of them, were capable of motion, and it was only the most pathetic of fallacies that caused one to view them as sentient things somehow debilitated by their broken-down surroundings. But I think I may have been dreaming on my feet for a few seconds: sounds and images seemed to come to me from places outside the immediate environment. I stared at an old building across the street—a bar, perhaps, or a nameless club

of some exclusive membership—and for a moment I received the impression that it was sending out strange noises, not from within its walls but from a far more distant source, as if it were transmitting from remote dimensions. And these noises had a visible aspect too, a kind of vibration in the night air, like static that one could see, sparkling in the darkness. But all the while there was just an old building and nothing more than that. I stared a little longer and the noises faded into confused voicey echoes, the sparkling became dull and disappeared, the connection lost, and the place fully resumed its decrepit reality.

The building looked much too intimate in size to afford concealment, and I perceived a certain privacy in its appearance that made me feel a newcomer would have been awkwardly noticeable. Quinn, however, had unhesitantly gone inside. I suppose it would have been helpful to observe him in there, to see what sort of familiarity he had with this establishment and its patrons. But all I know is that he remained in there for just less than an hour. During part of that time I waited at a counter stool in a diner down the street.

When Quinn finally came out he was drunk, observably so. This surprised me, because I had assumed that he intended to maintain the utmost control of his faculties that evening. The coffee I saw him drinking at that underground club seemed to support this assumption. But somehow Quinn's intentions to hold on to his sobriety, if he had such intentions to begin with, had been revised or forgotten.

I had positioned myself farther down the street by the time he reappeared, but there was much less need for caution now. It was ridiculously easy to remain unnoticed be-

hind a Quinn who could barely see the pavement he walked upon. A police car with flashing lights passed us on Carton, and Quinn exhibited no awareness of it. He halted on the sidewalk, but only to light a cigar. And he seemed to have a difficult time performing this task in a wind that turned his unbuttoned overcoat into a wild-winged cape flapping behind him. It was this wind, as much as Quinn himself, that led the way to our final stop where a few last lights relieved the darkness on the very edge of Nortown.

The lights were those of a theater marquise. And it was also here that we caught up with the revolving beacons of the patrol car. Behind it was another vehicle, a large luxury affair that had a deep gash in its shiny side. Not far away along the curb was a No Parking sign that was creased into an L shape. A tall policeman was inspecting the damaged city property, while the owner of the car that had apparently done the deed was standing by. Quinn gave only a passing glance at this tableau as he proceeded into the theater. A few moments later I followed him, but not before hearing the owner of that disfigured car tell the patrolman that something brightly colored had suddenly appeared in his headlights, causing him to swerve. And whatever it was had subsequently vanished.

Stepping into the theater, I noted that it must have been a place of baroque elegance in former days, though now the outlines of the enscrolled molding above were blurred by grayish sediment and the enormous chandelier was missing some of its parts and all of its glitter. The glass counter on my right had been converted, probably long ago, from a refreshment bar to a merchandise stand, pornographic magazines and other things having replaced the snacks.

I walked through one of a long line of doors and stood around for a while in the hallway behind the auditorium. Here a group of men were talking and smoking, dropping their cigarettes onto the floor and stepping them out. Their voices almost drowned out the austere soundtrack of the film that was being shown, the sound emanating from the aisle entrances and humming unintelligibly in the back walls. I looked into the film-lit auditorium and saw only a few moviegoers scattered here and there in the worn seats of the theater, mostly sitting by themselves. By the light of the film I located Quinn within the sparse audience. He was sitting very close to the screen in a front-row seat next to some curtains and an exit sign.

He seemed to be dozing in his seat rather than watching the film, and I found it a simple matter to position myself a few rows behind him. By that time, however, I found myself losing some of the resolve to remain attentive when Quinn himself appeared to have lost much of his earlier intensity, and the momentum of that night was running down. In the darkness of the theater I nodded, and then slept, much as it seemed Quinn had already done.

I did not sleep for long, no more than a few minutes, but this time I definitely dreamed. There was no nightmarish scenery in this dream, no threatening scenarios. Only darkness... darkness and a voice. The voice was that of Quinn. He was calling out to me from a great distance, a distance that did not seem a matter of physical space but one of immeasurable and alien dimensions. His words were distorted, as if passing through some medium that was misshaping them, turning human sounds into a beastlike rasping—the half-choking and half-shrieking voice of a thing being slowly and

methodically wounded. First he called my name several times in the wild modulations of a coarse scream. Then he said, as well as I can remember: “Stopped watching for them... fell asleep where are you help us... they're dreaming too they're dreaming shaping things with their dreams...”

I awoke and the first thing I saw was what seemed a great shapeless mass of color, which was only the giant images of the film. My eyes focused and I looked down the rows toward Quinn. He seemed to be slumped over very low in his seat or was nodding somehow, the top of his head much too near his shoulders. A mound of movement struggled on the other side of the seat, emerging sideways into the aisle. I could see it easily, its faint luminosity at first appearing to my vision as a reflection of the colors flickering erratically on the movie screen. But because of the diminished size and strange proportions, I could not be sure if it was Quinn or someone else. The bottom of his overcoat dragged along the floor, its sleeves hanging loose and handless, its collar caving in. The thing fought to take each awkward step, as if it did not have full control of its motion, like a marionette jerking this way and that way as it labors forth. Its glow seemed to be gaining in radiance now, a pulsing opalescent aura that crawled or flowed all around the lumbering dwarf.

I might still be in a dream, I reminded myself. This might be a distorted after-vision, a delirious blend of images derived from nightmare, imagination, and that enormous stain of colors at the front of the dark auditorium in which I had just awakened. I tried to collect myself, to focus upon the thing that was disappearing behind that thick curtain beneath the lighted exit sign.

I followed, passing through the opening in the frayed and velvety curtain. Beyond the curtain was a cement stairway leading up to the metal door that was now swinging closed. Halfway up the stairs I saw a familiar shoe which must have been lost in Quinn's frantic yet retarded haste. Where was he running and from what? These were my only thoughts now, without consideration of the pure strangeness of the situation. I had abandoned all connections to any guiding set of norms by which to judge reality or unreality, and merely accepted everything. However, all that was needed to shatter this acceptance waited outside something of total unacceptability, an ascent upon the infinite and rickety scaffold of estrangement. After I stepped out the door at the top of the stairs, I discovered that the previous events of that night had only served as a springboard into other realms, a point of departure from a world now diminishing with a furious velocity behind me.

The area outside the theater was unlit but nonetheless was not dark. Something was shining in a long narrow passageway between the theater and an adjacent building. This was where he had gone. Illumination was there, and sounds.

From around the corner's edge a grotesque light was trickling out, the first intimations of an ominous sunrise over a dark horizon. I dimly recognized this colored light, though not from my waking memory. It grew more intense, now pouring out in weird streams from beyond the solid margin of the building. And the more intense it grew, the more clearly I could hear the screaming voice that had called out to me in a dream. I shouted his name, but the swelling colored brightness was a field of fear which kept me from making any move toward it. It was no amalgam of colors

comparable to anything in mortal experience. It was as if all natural colors had been mutated into a painfully lush iridescence by some prism fantastically corrupted in its form; it was a rainbow staining the sky after a poison deluge; it was an aurora painting the darkness with a blaze of insanity, a blaze that did not burn vigorously but shimmered with an insect-jeweled frailness. And, in actuality, it was nothing like these color-filled effusions, which are merely a feeble means of partially fixing a reality uncommunicable to those not initiated to it, a necessary resorting to the makeshift gibberish of the mystic isolated by his experience and left without a language to describe it.

The entire experience was temporally rather brief, though its unreal quality made it seem of an indefinite duration—the blink of an eye or an eon. Suddenly the brightness ceased flowing out from the other side of the wall, as if some strange spigot had been abruptly turned off somewhere. The screaming had also stopped. I stood in the silence and moonlit darkness behind the theater. Immediately I rushed around the corner of the building, but everything was now hopelessly safe, beyond rescue or recovery.

There was, in fact, nothing there. Nothing to relieve my sense of doubt as to what exactly had happened. (Though not a mere novitiate of the unreal, I have had my moments of dazed astonishment.) But perhaps there was one thing. On the ground was a burnt-out patch of earth, a shapeless and bare spot that was deprived of the weeds and litter that covered the surrounding area. Possibly it was only a place from which some object had recently been removed, spirited off, leaving the earth beneath it vacant and dead. For a moment, when I first looked at the spot, it seemed to twinkle

with a faint luminosity. Possibly I only imagined its outline as being that of a human silhouette, though one contorted in such a way that it might also have been mistaken for other things, other shapes. In any case, whatever had been there was now gone.

And around this barren little swatch of ground was only trash: newspapers mutilated by time and the elements; brown bags reduced by decay to their primal pulp; thousands of cigarette butts; and one item of debris that was almost new and had yet to have any transformations worked upon it. It was a thin book-like box. I picked it up. There were still two fresh cigars in it.

3

I do not recall making my way back to the apartment that night, but I woke up there the next morning. When I saw the sunlight shafting through my bedroom window, the enormous divide between night and day seemed comfortingly unbridgeable. Then I realized I had fallen asleep with all my clothes on and the connection was made once again. I jumped out of bed and stumbled over to my roommate's room, which of course was empty. For a moment I had entertained the protective thought that I had dreamed the events of the night before. Or perhaps dream merely overlapped reality in certain places props and stage sets from one having been deceptively transferred in my memory to the other. On another hand, maybe everything I recalled was just one dream mingling with its own kind, all of it lacking any point of contact with real facts and experiences, whatever they might finally be.

One fact, however, was later established: Quinn never returned to the apartment. After a few days I reported him as missing to the Nortown police. Before doing this I destroyed the notebook in his room, for in a fit of paranoia I thought the police would find it in the course of their investigations and then ask some rather uncomfortable questions. I did not want to explain to them things that they simply would not believe, especially activities indulged in that final night. This would only have erroneously cast suspicion upon myself. Fortunately, the Nortown authorities are notoriously lax in their official functions. As it turned out, the police asked very few questions and never came around to the apartment.

After Quinn's disappearance I immediately began looking for another apartment. And although my roommate was gone, the strange dreams continued during my last days at the old residence. But these dreams were different in some particulars. The general backdrop was much the same nightmare expanse, but now I viewed it from some mysterious distance outside the dream. It was actually more like watching a film than dreaming, and they did not seem to be my own dreams at all. Perhaps these were Quinn's leftover visions or terrors still haunting the apartment, for he played the dreams' central role. Perhaps it was in these dreams that I continued to follow Quinn beyond the point at which I lost him. For at that point I imagined him as already starting to change, and in my last dreams he changed further.

He no longer bore any resemblance to my former roommate, though with dreamlike omniscience I knew it was he. His shape kept changing, or rather was deliberately being changed by those kaleidoscopic beasts. Playing out a scene

from some Boschian hell, the tormenting demons encircled their victim and were dreaming him.

They dreamed him through a hideous series of grotesque transfigurations, maliciously altering the screaming mass of the damned soul. They were dreaming things out of him and dreaming things into him. Finally, the purpose of their transformations became apparent. They were torturing their victim through a number of stages which would ultimately result in his becoming one of them, fulfilling his most fearful and obsessive vision. I no longer recognized him but saw that there was now one more glittering beast that took its place with the others and frolicked among them.

This was the last dream I had before leaving the apartment. There have been no others at least none that have troubled my own sleep. I cannot say the same for that of my new roommate, who rages in his slumber night after night. Once or twice he has attempted to communicate to me his strange visions and the company into which they have led him. But he can see that I myself am not afflicted with the same disease of dreams. Perhaps he will never suspect that I am now its carrier.

The Glamour (2011 Grimscribe Version)

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It had long been my practice to wander late at night and often to attend movie theaters at this time. But something else was involved on the night I went to that theater in a part of town I had never visited before. A new tendency, a mood or penchant formerly unknown to me, seemed to lead the way. How difficult to say anything precise about this mood that overcame me, because it seemed to belong to my surroundings as much as to my self. As I advanced farther into that part of town I had never visited before, my attention was drawn to a certain aspect of things—a fine aura of fantasy radiating from the most common sights, places and objects that were both blurred and brightened in my gaze.

Despite the lateness of the hour, there was an active glow cast through many of the shop windows I passed. Along one particular avenue, the starless evening was glazed by these lights, these diamonds of plate glass set within old buildings of dark brick. I paused before the display window of a toy store and was entranced by a chaotic tableau of preposterous excitation. My eyes followed several things at once: the fated antics of mechanized monkeys that clapped tiny cymbals or somersaulted uncontrollably; the destined pirouettes of a music-box ballerina; the grotesque wobbling of a newly sprung jack-in-the-box. The inside of the store was a Christmas-tree clutter of merchandise receding into a background

that looked shadowed and empty. An old man with a smooth pate and angular eyebrows stepped forward to the front window and began rewinding some of the toys to keep them in ceaseless gyration. While performing this task he suddenly looked up at me, his face expressionless.

I moved down the street, where other windows framed little worlds so strangely picturesque and so dreamily illuminated in the shabby darkness of that part of town. One of them was a bakery whose window display was a gallery of sculptured frosting, a winter landscape of swirling, drifting whiteness, of snowy rosettes and layers of icy glitter. At the center of the glacial kingdom was a pair of miniature people frozen atop a many-tiered wedding cake. But beyond the brilliant arctic scene I saw only the deep blackness of an establishment that was closed for the night. Standing outside another window nearby, I was uncertain if the place was open for business or not. In the background, a few figures were positioned here and there within faded lighting reminiscent of an old photograph, though it seemed they were beings of the same kind as the window dummies of this store, which apparently trafficked in dated styles of clothing. Even the faces of the manikins, as a glossy light fell upon them, wore the placidly enigmatic expressions of a different time.

I saw no one enter or exit the many doors along the sidewalks where I strolled that night. A canvas awning that some proprietor had neglected to roll up for the night was flapping in the wind. Nevertheless, as I have described, there reigned a vitality of enterprise everywhere I looked, and I felt the kind of acute anticipation that a child might experience at a carnival, where each lurid attraction incites fantastic speculations, while unexpected desires arise for some-

thing which has no specific qualities in the imagination yet seems to be only a few steps away. Thus my mood had not abandoned me but only grew stronger, a possessing impulse without object.

Then I saw the marquee for a movie theater, though not one I intended to patronize. For the letters spelling out the name of the theater were broken and unreadable, while the title on the marquee was similarly damaged, as if stones had been thrown at it, a series of attempts made to efface the words that I finally deciphered. The feature being advertised was called *The Glamour*.

When I reached the front of the theater I found that the row of doors forming the entrance had been barricaded by crosswise planks with notices posted upon them warning that the building had been condemned. This action was apparently taken some time ago, judging by the weathered condition of the boards that blocked my way and the dated appearance of the notices stuck upon them. As I was about to proceed on my way, however, I saw that the marquee was illuminated, wretchedly aglow with a light that I previously thought was a reflection from a nearby streetlamp. It was beneath this same streetlamp that I now noticed a double-faced sign propped up on the sidewalk, an inconspicuous little board that read: ENTRANCE TO THE THEATER. Beneath these words was an arrow pointing into an alleyway which separated the theater from the remaining buildings on the block. Peeking into this dark opening, this aperture in the otherwise solid façade of that particular street, I saw only a long, narrow corridor with a single light set far into its depths. The light shone with a strange shade of purple, like that of a freshly exposed heart, and appeared to be posi-

tioned over a doorway leading into the theater. It had long been my practice to attend late performances at movie theaters—this is what I reminded myself. But whatever reservations I felt at the time were easily overcome by a new surge of the mood I was experiencing that night in a part of town I had never visited before.

The purple lamp did indeed mark a way into the theater, casting its arterial light upon a door that reiterated the word "ENTRANCE." Stepping inside, I entered a tight hallway where the walls glowed a deep pink, very similar in tint to that little beacon in the alley but more reminiscent of a richly blooded brain than a beating heart. At the end of the hallway I could see my reflection in a ticket window, and approaching it I noticed that those walls so close to me were veiled from floor to ceiling with what appeared to be cobwebs. This gossamer material was also strewn upon the carpet leading to the ticket window, wispy shrouds that did not scatter when I walked over them, as if they had securely bound themselves to the carpet's worn and shallow fiber, or were tightly combed into it, sparse hairs sticking to the scalp of an old corpse.

There was no one behind the ticket window, no one I could see in that small space of darkness beyond the blur of purple-tinted glass in which my reflection was held. Nevertheless, a ticket was protruding from a slot beneath the semi-circular cutaway at the bottom of the window, sticking out like a paper tongue. A few hairs lay beside it.

"Admission is free," said a man who was now standing in the doorway beside the ticket booth. His suit was well-fitted and neat, but his face appeared somehow a mess, bristling

over all its contours. His tone was polite, even passive, when he said, “The theater is under new ownership.”

“Are you the manager?” I asked.

“I was just on my way to the rest room.”

Without further comment he drifted off into the darkness of the theater. For a moment something floated in the empty space he left in the doorway—a swarm of filaments like dust that scattered or settled before I stepped through. And in those first few seconds inside, all I could see were the words “rest room” glowing above a door as it slowly closed.

I maneuvered with caution until my sight became sufficient to the dark and allowed me to find a door leading to the auditorium of the movie theater. But once inside, as I stood at the summit of a sloping aisle, all previous orientation to my surroundings underwent a setback. The room was illuminated by an elaborate chandelier centered high above the floor, as well as a series of light fixtures along either of the side walls. I was not surprised by the dimness of the lighting nor by its hue, which made shadows appear faintly bloodshot—a sickly, liverish shade that might be witnessed in an operating room where a torso lies open on the table, its entrails a palette of pinks and reds and purples… diseased viscera imitating all the shades of sunset.

However, my perception of the theater auditorium remained problematic not because of any oddities of illumination but for another reason. While I experienced no difficulty in mentally registering the elements around me—the separate aisles and rows of seats, the curtain-flanked movie screen, the well-noted chandelier and wall lights—it seemed impossible to gain a sense of these features in simple accord with their appearances. I saw nothing that I have not de-

scribed, yet the round-backed seats were at the same time rows of headstones in a graveyard; the aisles were endless filthy alleys, long desolate corridors in an old asylum, or the dripping passages of a sewer narrowing into the distance; the pale movie screen was a dust-blinded window in a dark unvisited cellar, a mirror gone rheumy with age in an abandoned house; the chandelier and smaller fixtures were the facets of murky crystals embedded in the clammy walls of an unknown cavern. In other words, this movie theater was merely a virtual image, a veil upon a complex collage of other places, all of which shared certain qualities that were projected into my vision, as though the things I saw were possessed by something I could not see.

But as I lingered in the theater auditorium, settling in a seat toward the back wall, I realized that even on the level of plain appearances there was a peculiar phenomenon I had not formerly observed, or at least had yet to perceive to its fullest extent. I am speaking of the cobwebs.

When I first entered the theater I saw them clinging to the walls and carpeting. Now I saw how much they were a part of the theater and how I had mistaken the nature of these long pale threads. Even in the hazy purple light, I could discern that they had penetrated into the fabric of the seats in the theater, altering the weave in its depths and giving it a slight quality of movement, the slow curling of thin smoke. It seemed the same with the movie screen, which might have been a great rectangular web, densely woven and faintly in motion, vibrating at the touch of some unseen force. I thought: "Perhaps this subtle and pervasive *wriggling* within the theater may clarify the tendency of its elements to suggest other things and other places thoroughly unlike a

simple auditorium, a process parallel to the ever-mutating images of clouds." All textures in the theater appeared similarly affected, without control over their own nature, but I could not clearly see as high as the chandelier. Even some of the others in the audience, which was small and widely scattered, were practically invisible to my eyes.

Furthermore, there may have been something in my mood that night, given my sojourn in a part of town I had never visited before, that influenced what I was able to see. And this mood had become steadily enhanced since I first stepped into the theater, and indeed from the moment I looked upon the marquee advertising a feature entitled *The Glamour*. Having taken my place among the quietly expectant audience of the theater, I began to suffer an exacerbation of this mood. Specifically, I sensed a greater proximity to the point of focus for my mood that night, a tingling closeness to something quite literally *behind the scene*. Increasingly I became unconcerned with anything except the consummation or terminus of this abject and enchanting adventure. Consequences were evermore difficult to regard from my tainted perspective.

Therefore I was not hesitant when this focal point for my mood suddenly felt so near at hand, as close as the seat directly behind my own. I was quite sure this seat had been empty when I selected mine, that all the seats for several rows around me were unoccupied. And I would have been aware if someone had arrived to fill this seat directly behind me. Nevertheless, like a sudden chill announcing bad weather, there was now a definite presence I could feel at my back, a force that pressed itself upon me and inspired a surge of dark elation. But when I looked around, not quickly yet

fully determined, I saw no occupant in the seat behind me, or in any seat between me and the back wall of the theater. I continued to stare at the empty seat because my sensation of a vibrant presence there was unrelieved. And in my staring I perceived that the fabric of the seat, the inner webbing of swirling fibers, had composed a pattern in the image of a face—an old woman's face with an expression of avid malignance—floating amidst wild shocks of twisting hair. The face itself was a portrait of atrocity, a grinning image of lust for sites and ceremonies of mayhem. And it was formed of those hairs stitching themselves together.

All the stringy, writhing cobwebs of that theater, as I now discovered, were the reaching tendrils of a vast netting of hairs. And in this discovery my mood of the evening, which had delivered me to a part of town I had never visited before and to that very theater, only became more expansive and defined, taking in scenes of graveyards and alleyways, reeking sewers and musty corridors of insanity as well as the immediate vision of an old theater that now, as I had been told, was under new ownership. But my mood abruptly faded, along with the face in the fabric of the theater seat, when a voice spoke to me. It said:

“You must have seen her, by the looks of you.”

A man sat down one seat away from mine. It was not the same person I had met earlier; this one's face was nearly normal, although his suit was littered with hair that was not his own.

“So did you see her?” he asked.

“I'm not sure what I saw,” I replied.

He seemed almost to burst out giggling, his voice trembling on the edge of a joyous hysteria. “You would be sure

enough if there had been a private encounter, I can tell you."

"Something was happening, then you sat down."

"Sorry," he said. "Did you know that the theater has just come under new ownership?"

"I didn't notice what the show times are."

"Show times?"

"For the feature."

"Oh, there isn't any feature. Not as such."

"But there must be... something," I insisted.

"Yes, there's something," he replied excitedly, his fingers stroking his cheek.

"What, exactly? And these cobwebs..."

But the lights were going down into darkness. "Quiet now," he whispered. "It's about to begin."

Soon the screen before us glowed a pale purple in the blackness and vague images unaccompanied by sound began to take form upon it, as if a lens were being focused on a microscopic world. To be sure, the movie screen might have been a great glass slide upon which were projected to gigantic proportions a landscape of organisms normally hidden from our sight. But as these visions coalesced and clarified, I recognized them as something I had already seen, more accurately *sensed*, in that theater. The images were appearing on the screen as if a pair of disembodied eyes was moving within venues of profound morbidity and degeneration. Here was the purest essence of those places I had felt were superimposing themselves on the genuinely tangible aspects of the theater—those graveyards, alleys, grimy corridors, and subterranean passages whose spirit had intruded on another locale and altered it. Yet the places now revealed on the movie screen were without an identity I could name:

they were the fundament of the sinister and seamy regions which cast their spectral ambiance on the reality of the theater but which were themselves merely the shadows, the superficial counterparts, of a deeper, more obscure realm. Farther and farther into it we were being taken.

The all-pervasive purple coloration could now be seen as emanating from the labyrinth of a living anatomy: a compound of the reddish, bluish, palest pink structures, all of them morbidly inflamed and lesioned to release a purple light. We were being guided through a catacomb of putrid chambers and cloisters, the most secreted ways and waysides of an infernal land. Whatever these spaces may once have been, they were now habitations for ceremonies of a private sabbat. The hollows in their fleshy, gelatinous integuments streamed with something like moss, a fungus in flimsy strands that were threading themselves into translucent tissue and quivering beneath it like veins. It was indeed the sabbat ground, secret and unconsecrated, but it was also the theater of a mad surgery. The hair-thin sutures stitched among the yielding entrails, unseen hands designing unnatural shapes and systems, weaving a nest in which the possession would take place, a web wherein the bits and pieces of the anatomy could be consumed at leisure. There seemed to be no one in sight, yet everything was scrutinized from an intimate perspective, the viewpoint of that invisible surgeon, the weaver and web-maker, the old puppet-master who was setting a helpless creature with new strings and placing him under the control of a new owner. And through her eyes, entranced, we witnessed the work being done.

Then those eyes began to withdraw, and the purple world of the organism receded into purple shadows. When the eyes

finally emerged from where they had been, the movie screen was filled with the face and naked chest of a man. His posture was rigid, betraying a state of paralysis, and his eyes were fixed, yet strikingly alive. “She's showing us,” whispered the man who was sitting nearby me. “She has taken him. He cannot feel who he is any longer, only her presence within him.”

This statement, at first sight of the possessed, seemed to be the case. Certainly such a view of the situation provided a terrific stimulus to my own mood of the evening, urging it toward culmination in a type of degraded rapture, a seizure of debauched panic. Nonetheless, as I stared at the face of the man on the screen, he became known to me as the one I encountered in the vestibule of the theater. The recognition was difficult, however, because his flesh was now even more obscured by the webs of hair woven through it, thick as a full beard in spots. His eyes were also quite changed and glared out at the audience with a ferocity that suggested he indeed served as the host of great evil. But all the same, there was something in those eyes that belied the fact of a complete transformation—an awareness of the bewitchment and an appeal for deliverance. Within the next few moments, this observation assumed a degree of substance.

For the man on the movie screen regained himself, although briefly and in limited measure. His effort of will was evident in the subtle contortions of his face, and his ultimate accomplishment was modest enough: he managed to open his mouth in order to scream. Of course no sound was projected from the movie screen, which only played a music of images for eyes that would see what should not be seen. Thus, a disorienting effect was created, a sensory dissonance

which resulted in my being roused from the mood of the evening, its spell over me echoing to nothingness. Because the scream that resonated in the auditorium had originated in another part of the theater, a place beyond the auditorium's towering back wall.

Consulting the man who was sitting near me, I found him oblivious to my comments about the scream within the theater. He seemed neither to hear nor see what was happening around him and what was happening to him. Long wiry hairs were sprouting from the fabric of the seats, snaking low along their arms and along every part of them. The hairs had also penetrated into the cloth of the man's suit, but I could not make him aware of what was happening. Finally I rose to leave, because I could feel the hairs tugging to keep me in position. As I stood up they ripped away from me like stray threads pulled from a sleeve or pocket.

No one else in the auditorium turned away from the man on the movie screen, who had lost the ability to cry out and relapsed into a paralytic silence. Proceeding up the aisle I glanced above at a rectangular opening high in the back wall of the theater, the window-like slot from which images of a movie are projected. Framed within this aperture was the silhouette of what looked like an old woman with long and wildly tangled hair. I could see her eyes gazing fierce and malignant at the purple glow of the movie screen. And from these eyes were sent forth two shafts of the purest purple light that shot through the darkness of the auditorium.

Exiting the theater the way I had come in, it was not possible to ignore the words “rest room,” so brightly were they now shining. But the lamp over the side door in the alley was dead; the sign reading ENTRANCE TO THE THEATER

was gone. Even the letters spelling out the name of the feature that evening had been taken down. So this had been the last performance. Henceforth the theater would be closed to the public; somehow I knew this to be the case.

Also closed, if only for the night, were all the other businesses along that particular street in a part of town I had never visited before. Despite the fact that they had been lit up before, even the ones that had shut their doors at that late hour, the shop windows were now dark. And how sure I was that behind each one of those dark windows I passed was the even darker silhouette of an old woman with glowing eyes and a great head of monstrous hair.

The Glamour (1991 Grimscribe Version)

First published in *Grimscribe*, 1991

It had long been my practice to wander late at night and often to attend movie theaters at this time. But something else was involved on the night I went to that theater in a part of town I had never visited before. A new tendency, a mood or penchant formerly unknown to me, seemed to lead the way. How difficult to say anything precise about this mood that overcame me, because it seemed to belong to my surroundings as much as to my self. As I advanced farther into that part of town I had never visited before, my attention was drawn to a certain aspect of things—a fine aura of fantasy radiating from the most common sights, places and objects that were both blurred and brightened as they projected themselves into my vision.

Despite the lateness of the hour, there was an active glow cast through many of the shop windows in that part of town. Along one particular avenue, the starless evening was glazed by these lights, these diamonds of plate glass set within old buildings of dark brick. I paused before the display window of a toy store and was entranced by a chaotic tableau of preposterous excitation. My eyes followed several things at once: the fated antics of mechanized monkeys that clapped tiny cymbals or somersaulted uncontrollably; the destined pirouettes of a music-box ballerina; the grotesque wobbling of a newly sprung jack-in-the-box. The inside of the store

was a Christmas-tree clutter of merchandise receding into a background that looked shadowed and empty. An old man with a smooth pate and angular eyebrows stepped forward to the front window and began rewinding some of the toys to keep them in ceaseless gyration. While performing this task he suddenly looked up at me, his face expressionless.

I moved down the street, where other windows framed little worlds so strangely picturesque and so dreamily illuminated in the shabby darkness of that part of town. One of them was a bakery whose window display was a gallery of sculptured frosting, a winter landscape of swirling, drifting whiteness, of snowy rosettes and layers of icy glitter. At the center of the glacial kingdom was a pair of miniature people frozen atop a many-tiered wedding cake. But beyond the brilliant arctic scene I saw only the deep blackness of an establishment that kept short hours. Standing outside another window nearby, I was uncertain if the place was open for business or not.

A few figures were positioned here and there within faded lighting reminiscent of an old photograph, though it seemed they were beings of the same kind as the window dummies of this store, which apparently trafficked in dated styles of clothing. Even the faces of the mannikins, as a glossy light fell upon them, wore the placidly enigmatic expressions of a different time.

But in fact there actually were several places doing business at that hour of the night and in that part of town, however scarce potential customers appeared to be on this particular street. I saw no one enter or exit the many doors along the sidewalk; a canvas awning that some proprietor had neglected to roll up for the night was flapping in the

wind. Nevertheless, I did sense a certain vitality around me and felt the kind of acute anticipation that a child might experience at a carnival, where each lurid attraction incites fantastic speculations, while unexpected desires arise for something which has no specific qualities in the imagination yet seems to be only a few steps away. Thus my mood had not abandoned me but only grew stronger, a possessing impulse without object.

Then I saw the marquee for a movie theater, something I might easily have passed by. For the letters spelling out the name of the theater were broken and unreadable, while the title on the marquee was similarly damaged, as though stones had been thrown at it, a series of attempts made to efface the words that I finally deciphered. The feature being advertised that night was called The Glamour.

When I reached the front of the theater I found that the row of doors forming the entrance had been barricaded by crosswise planks with notices posted upon them warning that the building had been condemned. This action was apparently taken some time ago, judging by the weathered condition of the boards that blocked my way and the dated appearance of the notices stuck upon them. In any case, the marquee was still illuminated, if rather poorly. So I was not surprised to see a double-faced sign propped up on the sidewalk, an inconspicuous little board that read: ENTRANCE TO THE THEATER. Beneath these words was an arrow pointing into an alleyway which separated the theater from the remaining buildings on the block. Peeking into this dark opening, this aperture in the otherwise solid façade of that particular street, I saw only a long, narrow corridor with a single light set far into its depths. The light shone with a

strange shade of purple, like that of a freshly exposed heart, and appeared to be positioned over a doorway leading into the theater. It had long been my practice to attend movie theaters late at night—this is what I reminded myself. But whatever reservations I felt at the time were easily overcome by a new surge of the mood I was experiencing that night in a part of town I had never visited before.

The purple lamp did indeed mark a way into the theater, casting a kind of arterial light upon a door that reiterated the word “entrance.” Stepping inside, I entered a tight hallway where the walls glowed a deep pink, very similar in shade to that little beacon in the alley but reminding me more of a richly blooded brain than a beating heart.

At the end of the hallway I could see my reflection in a ticket window, and approaching it I noticed that those walls so close to me were veiled from floor to ceiling with what appeared to be cobwebs. These cobwebs were also strewn upon the carpet leading to the ticket window, wispy shrouds that did not scatter as I walked over them, as if they had securely bound themselves to the carpet's worn and shallow fiber, or were growing out of it like postmortem hairs on a corpse.

There was no one behind the ticket window, no one I could see in that small space of darkness beyond the blur of purple-tinted glass in which my reflection was held. Nevertheless, a ticket was protruding from a slot beneath the semi-circular cutaway at the bottom of the window, sticking out like a paper tongue. A few hairs lay beside it.

“Admission is free,” said a man who was now standing in the doorway beside the ticket booth. His suit was well-fitted and neat, but his face appeared somehow in a mess, bristled

over all its contours. His tone was polite, even passive, when he said, “The theater is under new ownership. “

“Are you the manager?” I asked.

“I was just on my way to the rest room.”

Without further comment he drifted off into the darkness of the theater. For a moment something floated in the empty space he left in the doorway a swarm of filaments like dust that scattered or settled before I stepped through. And in those first few seconds inside, the only thing I could see were the words “rest room” glowing above a door as it slowly closed.

I maneuvered with caution until my sight became sufficient to the dark and allowed me to find a door leading to the auditorium of the movie theater. But once inside, as I stood at the summit of a sloping aisle, all previous orientation to my surroundings underwent a setback. The room was illuminated by an elaborate chandelier centered high above the floor, as well as a series of light fixtures along either of the side walls. I was not surprised by the dimness of the lighting nor by its hue, which made shadows appear faintly bloodshot—a sickly, liverish shade that might be witnessed in an operating room where a torso lies open on the table, its entrails a palette of pinks and reds and purples… diseased viscera imitating all the shades of sunset.

However, my perception of the theater auditorium remained problematic not because of any oddities of illumination but for another reason. While I experienced no difficulty in mentally registering the elements around me the separate aisles and rows of seats, the curtain flanked movie screen, the well-noted chandelier and wall lights, it seemed impossible to gain a sense of these features in simple accord

with their appearances. I saw nothing that I have not described, yet... the roundbacked seats were at the same time rows of headstones in a graveyard; the aisles were endless filthy alleys, long desolate corridors in an old asylum, or the dripping passages of a sewer narrowing into the distance; the pale movie screen was a dust-blinded window in a dark unvisited cellar, a mirror gone rheumy with age in an abandoned house; the chandelier and smaller fixtures were the facets of murky crystals embedded in the sticky walls of an unknown cavern. In other words, this movie theater was merely a virtual image, a veil upon a complex collage of other places, all of which shared certain qualities that were projected into my vision, as though the things I saw were possessed by something I could not see.

But as I lingered in the theater auditorium, settling in a seat toward the back wall, I realized that even on the level of plain appearances there was a peculiar phenomenon I had not formerly observed, or at least had yet to perceive to its fullest extent. I am speaking of the cobwebs.

When I first entered the theater I saw them clinging to the walls and carpeting. Now I saw how much they were a part of theater and how I had mistaken the nature of these long pale threads. Even in the hazy purple light, I could discern that they had penetrated into the fabric of the seats in the theater, altering the weave in its depths and giving it a slight quality of movement, the slow curling of thin smoke. It seemed the same with the movie screen, which might have been a great rectangular web, tightly woven and faintly in motion, vibrating at the touch of some unseen force. I thought: “Perhaps this subtle and pervasive wriggling within the theater may clarify the tendency of its elements

to suggest other things and other places thoroughly unlike a simple theater auditorium, a process parallel to the ever-mutating images of dense clouds." All textures in the theater appeared similarly affected, without control over their own nature, but I could not clearly see as high as the chandelier. Even some of the others in the audience, which was small and widely scattered about the auditorium, were practically invisible to my eyes.

Furthermore, there may have been something in my mood that night, given my sojourn in a part of town I had never visited before, that influenced what I was able to see. And this mood had become steadily enhanced since I first stepped into the theater, and indeed from the moment I looked upon the marquee advertising a feature entitled The Glamour. Having at last found a place among the quietly expectant audience of the theater, I began to suffer an exacerbation of this mood. Specifically, I sensed a greater proximity to the point of focus for my mood that night, a tingling closeness to something quite literally behind the scene. Increasingly I became unconcerned with anything except the consummation or terminus of this abject and enchanting adventure. Consequences were even more difficult to regard from my tainted perspective.

Therefore I was not hesitant when this focal point for my mood suddenly felt so near at hand, as close as the seat directly behind my own. I was quite sure this seat had been empty when I selected mine, that all the seats for several rows around me were unoccupied. And I would have been aware if someone had arrived to fill this seat directly behind me. Nevertheless, like a sudden chill announcing bad weather, there was now a definite presence I could feel at my

back, a force of sorts that pressed itself upon me and inspired a surge of dark elation. But when I looked around, not quickly yet fully determined, I saw no occupant in the seat behind me, nor in any seat between me and the back wall of the theater.

I continued to stare at the empty seat because my sensation of a vibrant presence there was unrelieved. And in my staring I perceived that the fabric of the seat, the inner webbing of swirling fibers, had composed a pattern in the image of a face-an old woman's face with an expression of avid malignance, floating amidst wild shocks of twisting hair. The face itself was a portrait of atrocity, a grinning image of lust for sites and ceremonies of mayhem. It was formed of those hairs stitching themselves together.

All the stringy, writhing cobwebs of that theater, as I now discovered, were the reaching tendrils of a vast netting of hairs. And in this discovery my mood of the evening, which had delivered me to a part of town I had never visited before and to that very theater, only became more expansive and defined, taking in scenes of graveyards and alleyways, reeking sewers and wretched corridors of insanity as well as the immediate vision of an old theater that now, as I had been told, was under new ownership. But my mood abruptly faded, along with the face in the fabric of the theater seat, when a voice spoke to me. It said:

“You must have seen her, by the looks of you.” A man sat down one seat away from mine. It was not the same person I had met earlier; this one's face was nearly normal, although his suit was littered with hair that was not his own. “So did you see her?” he asked.

“I'm not sure what I saw,” I replied.

He seemed almost to burst out giggling, his voice trembling on the edge of a joyous hysteria. “You would be sure enough if there had been a private encounter, I can tell you.”

“Something was happening, then you sat down.”

“Sorry,” he said. “Did you know that the theater has just come under new ownership?”

“I didn't notice what the showtimes are.”

“Showtimes?”

“For the feature.”

“Oh, there isn't any feature. Not as such.”

“But there must be... something,” I insisted.

“Yes, there's something,” he replied excitedly, his fingers stroking his cheek.

“What, exactly. And these cobwebs...”

But the lights were going down into darkness. “Quiet now,” he whispered. “It's about to begin.”

The screen before us was glowing a pale purple in the blackness, although I heard no sounds from the machinery of a movie projector. Neither were there any sounds connected with the images which were beginning to take form on the screen, as if a lens were being focused on a microscopic world. And in some way the movie screen might have been a great glass slide that projected to gigantic proportions a landscape of organism normally hidden from our sight. But as these visions coalesced and clarified, I recognized them as something I had already seen, more accurately sensed, in that theater. The images were appearing on the screen as if a pair of disembodied eyes was moving within venues of profound morbidity and degeneration. Here was the purest essence of those places I had felt were superimposing themselves on the genuinely tangible aspects of the theater, those

graveyards, alleys, decayed corridors, and subterranean passages whose spirit had intruded on another locale and altered it. Yet the places now revealed on the movie screen were without an identity I could name: they were the fundament of the sinister and seamy regions which cast their spectral ambience on the reality of the theater but which were themselves merely the shadows, the superficial counterparts of a deeper, more obscure realm. Farther and farther into it we were being taken.

The all-pervasive purple coloration could now be seen as emanating from the labyrinth of a living anatomy: a compound of the reddish, bluish, palest pink structures, all of them morbidly inflamed and lesioned to release a purple light. We were being guided through a catacomb of putrid chambers and cloisters, the most secreted ways and waysides of an infernal land. Whatever these spaces may once have been, they were now habitations for ceremonies of a private sabbath. The hollows in their fleshy, gelatinous integuments streamed with something like moss, a fungus in thin strands that were threading themselves into translucent tissue and quivering beneath it like veins. It was the sabbath ground, secret and unconsecrated, but it was also the theater of an insane surgery. The hair-like sutures stitched among the yielding entrails, unseen hands designing unnatural shapes and systems, weaving a nest in which the possession would take place, a web wherein the bits and pieces of the anatomy could be consumed at leisure. There seemed to be no one in sight, yet everything was scrutinized from an intimate perspective, the viewpoint of that invisible surgeon, the weaver and webmaker, the old puppet-master who was setting the helpless creature with new strings and placing him under

the control of a new owner. And through her eyes, entranced, we witnessed the work being done.

Then those eyes began to withdraw, and the purple world of the organism receded into purple shadows. When the eyes finally emerged from where they had been, the movie screen was filled with the face and naked chest of a man. His posture was rigid, betraying a state of paralysis, and his eyes were fixed, yet strikingly alive. “She's showing us,” whispered the man who was sitting nearby me. “She has taken him. He cannot feel who he is any longer, only her presence within him.”

This statement, at first sight of the possessed, seemed to be the case. Certainly such a view of the situation provided a terrific stimulus to my own mood of the evening, urging it toward culmination in a type of degraded rapture, a seizure of panic oblivion. Nonetheless, as I stared at the face of the man on the screen, he became known to me as the one I encountered in the vestibule of the theater.

The recognition was difficult, however, because his flesh was now even more obscured by the webs of hair woven through it, thick as a full beard in spots. His eyes were also quite changed and glared out at the audience with a ferocity that suggested he indeed served as the host of great evil. But all the same, there was something in those eyes that belied the fact of a complete transformation—an awareness of the bewitchment and an appeal for deliverance. Within the next few moments, this observation assumed a degree of substance.

For the man on the movie screen regained himself, although briefly and in limited measure. His effort of will was evident in the subtle contortions of his face, and his ultimate

accomplishment was modest enough: he managed to open his mouth in order to scream. Of course no sound was projected from the movie screen, which only played a music of images for eyes that would see what should not be seen. Thus, a disorienting effect was created, a sensory dissonance which resulted in my being roused from the mood of the evening, its spell over me echoing to nothingness. Because the scream that resonated in the auditorium had originated in another part of the theater, a place beyond the auditorium's towering back wall.

Consulting the man who was sitting near me, I found him oblivious to my comments about the scream within the theater. He seemed neither to hear nor see what was happening around him and what was happening to him. Long wiry hairs were sprouting from the fabric of the seats, snaking low along their arms and along every part of them. The hairs had also penetrated into the cloth of the man's suit, but I could not make him aware of what was happening. Finally I rose to leave, because I could feel the hairs tugging to keep me in position. As I stood up they ripped away from me like stray threads pulled from a sleeve or pocket.

No one else in the auditorium turned away from the man on the movie screen, who had lost the ability to cry out and relapsed into a paralytic silence. Proceeding up the aisle I glanced above at a rectangular opening high in the back wall of the theater, the window-like slot from which images of a movie are projected. Framed within this aperture was the silhouette of what looked like an old woman with long and wildly tangled hair. I could see her eyes gazing fierce and malignant at the purple glow of the movie screen. And from

these eyes were sent forth two shafts of the purest purple light that shot through the darkness of the auditorium.

Exiting the theater the way I had come in, it was not possible to ignore the words “rest room”, so brightly were they now shining. But the lamp over the side door in the alley was dead; the sign reading ENTRANCE TO THE THEATER was gone. Even the letters spelling out the name of the feature that evening had been taken down. So this had been the last performance. Henceforth the theater would be closed to the public.

Also closed, if only for the night, were all the other businesses along that particular street in a part of town I had never visited before. The hour was late, the shop windows were dark. But how sure I was that in each one of those dark windows I passed was the even darker silhouette of an old woman with glowing eyes and a great head of monstrous hair.

The Library Of Byzantium (2011 Grimscribe Version)

First published in *Grimscribe: His Lives And Works*, 1991

Father Sevich's Visit

In whatever corner of our old house I happened to find myself, I could always sense the arrival of a priest. Even in the most distant rooms of the upper floors, those rooms which had been closed up and which were forbidden to me, I would suddenly experience a very certain feeling. The climate of my surroundings then became inexplicably altered in a manner at first vaguely troublesome and afterward rather attractive. It was as if a new presence had invaded the very echoes of the air and entered into the mellow afternoon sunlight casting its glow upon dark wooden floors and the pale contortions of ancient wallpaper. All around me invisible games had begun. My earliest philosophy regarding the great priestly tribe was therefore not a simple one by any means; rather, it comprised a thick maze of propositions, a labyrinthine layering of systems in which abstract dread and a bizarre sort of indebtedness were forever confronting each other. In retrospect, then, the prelude to Father Sevich's visit seems to me as crucial, and as introductory to later events, as the visit itself. So I have no qualms about lingering upon these lonely moments.

For much of that day I had been secluded in my room, intently pursuing a typical activity of my early life and in the

process badly ravaging what previously had been a well-made bed. Having sharpened my pencil innumerable times, and having worn down a thick gray eraser into a stub, I was ready to give myself up as a relentless failure. The paper itself seemed to defy me, laying snares within its coarse texture to thwart my every aim. Yet this rebellious mood was a quite recent manifestation: I had been allowed to fill in nearly the entire scene before this breakdown in relations between myself and my materials.

The completed portion of my drawing was an intense impression of a monastic fantasy, evoking the cloistral tunnels and the vaulted penetralia without attempting a guide-book representation of them. Nevertheless, the absolute precision of two specific elements in the picture was very much on my mind. The first of these was a single row of columns receding in sharp perspective, a diminishing file of rigid sentinels starkly etched into the surrounding gloom. The second element was a figure who had hidden himself behind one of these columns and was peering out of the shadows at something frightful beyond the immediate scene. Only the figure's face and a single column-clutching hand were to be rendered. The hand I executed well enough, but when it came to the necessary features of fear which needed to be implanted on that countenance—there was simply no way to capture the desired effect. My wish was to have every detail of the unseen horror clearly readable in the physiognomy of the seer himself, a maddening task and, at the time, a futile one. Every manipulation of my soft-pointed pencil betrayed me, masking my victim with a series of completely irrelevant expressions. First it was misty-eyed wonder, and then a kind of cretinous bafflement. At one point the gentleman ap-

peared to be smiling in an almost amiable way at his imminent doom.

Thus, one may comprehend how easily I succumbed to the distraction of Father Sevich's visit. My pencil stopped dead on the paper, my eyes began to wander about, checking the curtains, the corners, and the open closet for something that had come to play hide-and-seek with me. I heard footsteps methodically treading down the long hallway and stopping at my bedroom door. My father's voice, muffled by solid wood, instructed me to make an appearance downstairs. There was a visitor.

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My frustrations of that afternoon must have disadvantaged me somewhat, because I completely fell into the trap of expectation: that is, I believed our caller was only Father Orne, who often dropped by and who served as a kind of ecclesiastical familiar of our family. But when I descended the stairs and saw that strange black cloak drooping down from the many-pegged rack beside the front door, and when I saw the wide-brimmed hat of the same color hanging beside it like an age-old companion, I realized my error.

From the parlor came the sound of soft conversation, the softest part of which was supplied by Father Sevich himself, whose speaking voice was no more than a sleepy whisper. He was seated, quite fairly, in one of our most expansive armchairs, toward which destination my mother maneuvered me as soon as I entered the room. During the presentation I was silent, and for a few suspenseful moments afterward continued to remain so. Father Sevich thought that I was fascinated into muteness by his fancy walking stick, and he

said as much. At that moment the priest's voice was infiltrated, to my amazement, by a foreign accent I had not previously noticed. He handed his cane over to me for examination, and I hefted the formidable length of wood a few times. However, the real source of my fascination lay not in his personal accessories, but in the priest's own person, specifically in the chalky-looking texture of his round face.

Invited to join the afternoon gathering, I was seated in a chair identical to the one supporting Father Sevich's bulk, and angled slightly toward it. But my alliance to this group was in body only: I contributed not a word to the ensuing conversation, nor did I understand those words that now filled the parlor with their drowsy music. My concentration on the priest's face had wholly exiled me from the world of good manners and polite talk. It was not just the pale and powdery cast of his complexion, but also a certain emptiness, a look of incompleteness that made me think of some unfinished effigy in a toymaker's workshop. The priest smiled and squinted and performed several other common manipulations, none of which resulted in a true facial expression. Something vital to expression was missing, some essential spirit in which all expressions are born and evolve toward their unique destiny. And, to put it graphically, his flesh simply did not have the appearance of flesh.

At some point my mother and father found an excuse to leave me alone with Father Sevich, presumably to allow his influence to have a free rein over me, so that his sacerdotal presence might not be adulterated by the secularity of theirs. This development was in no way surprising, since it was my parents' secret hope that someday my life would take me at

least as far as the seminary, if not beyond that into the purple-robed mysteries of priesthood.

In the first few seconds after my parents had abandoned the scene, Father Sevich and I looked each other over, almost as if our previous introduction had counted for naught. And soon a very interesting thing happened: Father Sevich's face underwent a change, one in favor of the soul which had formerly been interred within his most obscure depths. Now, from out of that chalky tomb emerged a face of true expression, a masterly composition of animated eyes, living mouth, and newly flushed cheeks. This transformation, however, must have been achieved at a certain cost; for what his face gained in vitality, the priest's voice lost in volume. His words now sounded like those of a hopeless invalid, withered things reeking of medicines and prayers. What their exact topic of discourse was I'm not completely sure, but I do recall that my drawings were touched upon. Father Orne, of course, was already familiar with these fledgling works, though I do not recall that he ever expressed admiration for them. Nonetheless, it seemed that something in their pictorial nature had caused him to mention them to his colleague who was visiting us from the old country. Something had caused Father Orne to single my pictures out, as it were, among the sights of his parish.

Father Sevich spoke of those scribblings of mine in a highly circuitous and rarefied fashion, as if they were a painfully delicate subject which threatened a breach in our acquaintanceship. I did not grasp what constituted his tortuous and subtle interest in my pictures, but this issue was partially clarified when he showed me something: a little book

he was carrying within the intricate folds of his clerical frock.

The covering of the book had the appearance of varnished wood, all darkish and embellished with undulating grains. At first I thought that this object would feel every bit as brittle as it looked, until Father Sevich actually placed it in my hands and allowed me to discover that its deceptive binding was in fact extremely supple, even slippery. There were no words on the front of the book, only two thin black lines which intersected to create a cross. On closer examination, I observed that the horizontal beam of the cross had, on either end, squiggly little extensions resembling tiny hands. And the vertical beam appeared to widen at its vertex into something like a little bulb, so that the black decoration formed a sort of stick man.

At Father Sevich's instruction, I randomly opened the book and thumbed over several of its incredibly thin pages, which were more like layers of living tissue than dead pulp. There seemed to be an infinite number of them, with no possibility of ever reaching the beginning or the end of the volume merely by turning over the pages one by one. The priest warned me to be careful and not to harm any of these delicate leaves, for the book was very old, very fragile, and unusually precious.

The language in which the book was written resisted all but imaginary identifications by one who was as limited in years and learning as I was then. Even now, memory will not permit me to improve upon my initial speculation that the book was composed in some exotic tongue of antiquity. But its profusion of pictures alleviated many frustrations and illuminated the darkness of the book's secret symbols. In

these examples of the art of the woodcut, I could almost read the texts composing the book, every one of which seemed devoted to wearing away at a single theme: *salvation through suffering*.

It was this chamber of sacred horrors that Father Sevich believed would catch my eye and my interest. How few of us, he explained, really understood the holy purpose of such images of torment, the divine destiny toward which the paths of anguish have always led. The production, and even the mere contemplation, of these volumes of blessed agony was one of the great lost arts, he openly lamented. Then he began to speak about a certain library in the old country. But his words were now lost on me. My attention was already wandering along its own paths, and my eye was inextricably caught by the dense landscape of these old woodcuts. One scene in particular appeared exemplary of the book's soul.

The central figure in this illustration was bearded and emaciated, with his head bowed, hands folded, and knees bent. Contracted in an attitude of prayerful pleading, he seemed to be suspended in mid-air. All around this bony ascetic were torturing demons, surprisingly effective owing to, or perhaps despite, the artist's brutal technique and the sparseness of precise detail. An exception to this general rule of style was a single squatting devil whose single eye had clusters of perfect little eyes growing out of it; and each of the smaller eyes had its own bristling lashes that sprouted like weeds, an explosion of minute grotesquerie. The ascetic's own eyes were the focus of his particular form: stark white openings in an otherwise dark face, with two tiny pupils rolling deliriously heavenward. But what was it about the transports written on this face which inspired in me the

sense of things other than fear or pain, or even piety? In any event, I did find inspiration in this terrible scene, and tried to make an imprint of it upon the photographic plates of my memory.

With a tight grip of my index finger and thumb, I was holding the page on which this woodcut was reproduced when Father Sevich unexpectedly snatched the book out of my hands. I looked up, not at the priest but at my mother and father now returning to the parlor after their brief and calculated absence. Father Sevich was gazing in the same direction, while blindly stashing the little book back in its place. So he must not have noticed the thin leaf which was loosely draped over my fingers and which I immediately concealed between my legs. At any rate, he said nothing about the mishap. And at the time I could not imagine that any power on earth could perceive the loss of a single page from the impossibly dense and prodigious layers of that book. Certainly I was safe from the eyes of Father Sevich, which had once again become as dull and expressionless as the plaster complexion of his face.

Shortly thereafter the priest had to be on his way. With fascination I watched as he assembled himself in our foyer, donning his cloak, adjusting his huge hat, and propping up his large body with his walking stick. Before leaving, he invited us all to visit him in the old country, and we promised to do so should our travels ever take us to that part of the world. While my mother held me close to her side, my father opened the door for the priest. And the sunny afternoon, now grown windy and overcast, received him.

Father Sevich's Return

The stolen woodcut from the priest's prayer book, as I came to think of it, was not the solution I thought it would be. Although I suspected that it possessed certain inspirational powers, a modest fund of moral energy, I soon found that the macabre icon withheld its blessings from outsiders. I had not then considered that a sacred image of this kind would have such a secretive nature, for I was more infatuated with the profane lessons I believed it could teach—above all, how I might provide my faceless man in the monastery with a countenance of true terror. However, I learned no such lessons and was forced to leave my figure in an unfinished state, a ridiculously empty slate which I remained unable to embellish with the absolute horror of an off-stage atrocity. But the picture, I mean the one in the prayer book, did have another and unsuspected value for me.

Since I had already established a spiritual rapport with Father Sevich, I could not obstruct a certain awareness of his own mysteries. He soon became connected in my mind with unarticulated narratives of a certain kind, stories in the rough, and ones potentially epic, even cosmic, in scope. Without a doubt there was an aura of legend about him, a cycle of mute, incredible lore; and I resolved that his future movements merited my closest possible attention. Such a difficult undertaking was made infinitely easier due to my possession of that single, flimsy page torn from his prayer book.

I kept it with me at all times, protectively enclosed in some wrapping tissue I borrowed from my mother. The initial results were soon in coming, but at the same time they were not entirely successful, considering the expense of this rather prodigal burst of psychic effort. Hence, the early

scenes were highly imperfect, visions easily dispersed, fragmentary, some quite near to nonsense. Among them was a visit Father Sevich paid another family, a morose vignette in which the anemic priest seemed to have grown pale to the point of translucency.

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How alien is the deepest life of another: the unbelievable beginnings; the unimaginably elaborate developments; and the incalculable eons which prepare, which foretell, the multiform phenomena of an uncertain number of years! Much of what Father Sevich had endured in his allotted span could already be read on his face. But something still remained to be revealed in his features, something which the glowing lamp resting upon the desk, joined by the light of every constellation in the visible universe, was struggling to illuminate.

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When Father Sevich returned to his homeland, I lost all touch with his life's whereabouts, and soon my own life collapsed back into its established routine. After that weary and fruitless summer had passed, it was time for me to begin another year of school, to encounter once again the oppressive mysteries of the autumn season. But I had not entirely forgotten my adventure with Father Sevich. At the height of the fall semester we began to draw pumpkins with thick orange crayons whose points were awkwardly blunt, and with dull scissors we shaped black cats from the formless depths of black paper. Succumbing to a hopeless urge for innovation, I created a man-shaped silhouette with my paper and scissors. The just proportions of my handiwork even received compliments from the nun who served as our art instructor. But

when I trimmed the figure with a tiny white collar and gave it a crudely screaming mouth—there was outrage and there was punishment. Without arguing a happy sequence of cause and effect between this incident and what followed, it was not long afterward that the school season, for me, became eventful with illness. And it was during this time of shattered routine, as I lay three days and nights dripping with fever, that I regained my hold, with a visionary grasp that reached across the ocean between us, on the curious itinerary of Father Sevich.

With hat and cloak and walking stick, the old priest was hobbling along rather briskly, and alone, down the narrow, nocturnal streets of some very old town in the old country. It was a fairy-tale vision to which not even the most loving illustrator of medieval legends could do justice. Fortunately, the town itself—the serpentine lanes, the distorted glow of streetlamps, the superimposed confusion of pointed roofs, the thinnest blade of moon which seemed to belong to this town as it belonged to no other place on earth—does not require any protracted emphasis in this memoir. Although it did not give away its identity, either in name or location, the town still demanded a designation of some kind, some official title, however much in error it might be. And of all the names that had ever been attached to places of this world, the only one which seemed proper, in its delirious way, was an ancient name which, after all these years, seems no less fitting and no less ludicrous now than it did then. Unmentionably ludicrous, so I will not mention it.

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total blackness until the pathway opened into a small courtyard surrounded by high walls and lit by a single dull lamp at its center. He paused a moment to catch his breath, and when he gazed up at the night, as if to reconcile his course with the stars above, one could see his face sweating and shining in the jaundiced lamplight. Somewhere in the shadows that were draped and fluttering upon those high walls was an opening. Passing through this doubtful gate, the old priest continued his incredible rambling about the darkest and most remote quarters of the old town.

Now he was descending a stairway of cut stone which led below the level of the town's streets; then a brief tunnel brought him to another stairway which burrowed in a spiral down into the earth and absolute blackness. Knowing his way, the priest ultimately emerged from this nowhere of blackness when he suddenly entered a vast circular chamber. The place appeared to be a tower sunken beneath the town and soaring to a great and paradoxical height. In the upper reaches of the tower, tiny lights glimmered like stars and threw down their illumination in a patternless weave of crisscrossing strands.

The subterranean structure, at whose center Father Sevich now stood, ascended in a series of terraces, each bordered by a shining balustrade made of some golden metal and each circling the perimeter of the inner chamber. These terraces multiplied into the upward distance, contracting in perspective into smaller and thinner circles, blurring together at some point and becoming lost in clouds of shadows that hovered far above. Each level was furthermore provided with numerous and regularly spaced portals, all of them dark, hinting at nothing of what lay beyond their unguarded

thresholds. But one might surmise that if this was the library of which the priest spoke, if this was a true repository of such books as the one he had just removed from under his cloak, then those slender openings must have led to the archives of this prodigious athenaeum, suggesting nothing less than a bibliographic honeycomb of unknown expanse and complexity. Scanning the shadows about him, the priest seemed to be anticipating the appearance of someone in charge, someone entrusted with the care of this institution. Then one of the shadows, one of the most sizeable shadows and the one closest to the priest, turned around… and three such caretakers now stood before him.

This triumvirate of figures seemed to share the same face, which was almost a caricature of serenity. They were attired very much like the priest himself, and their eyes were large and calm. When the priest held out the book to the one in the middle, a hand moved forward to take it, a hand as white as the whitest glove. The central figure then rested its other hand flat upon the front of the book, and then the figure to the left extended a hand which laid itself upon the first; then a third hand, belonging to the third figure, covered them both with its soft white palm and long fingers, uniting the three. The hands remained thus placed for some time, as if an invisible transference of fabulously subtle powers was occurring, something being given or received. The heads of the three figures slowly turned toward one another, and simultaneously there was a change in the atmosphere of the chamber streaked with the chaotic rays of underworld starlight. And if forced to name this new quality and point to its outward sign, one might draw attention to a

certain look in the large eyes of the three caretakers, a certain expression of rarefied scorn or disgust.

They removed their hands from the book and placed them once again out of view. Then the caretakers turned their eyes upon the priest, who had already moved a few steps away from these indignant shadows. But as the priest began to turn his back on them, almost precisely at the midpoint of his pivot, he seemed to freeze abruptly in position, like someone who has just heard his name called out to him in some strange place far from home. However, he did not remain thus transfixed for very long, this statue poised to take a step which is forbidden to it, with its face as rigid and pale as a monument's stone. Soon his black, ankle-high shoes began to kick about as they left the solid ground. And when the priest had risen a little higher, well into the absolute insecurity of empty air, he lost hold of his walking stick; and it fell to the great empty expanse of the tower's floor, where it looked as small as a twig or a pencil. His wide-brimmed hat soon followed, settling crown-up beside the cane, as the priest began tossing and turning in the air like a restless sleeper, wrapping himself up in the dark cocoon of his cloak. Then the cloak was torn away, but not by the thrashing priest. Something else was up there with him, ascending the uncountable tiers of the tower, or perhaps many unseen things which ripped at his clothes, at the sparse locks of his hair, at the interlocking fingers of his hands which were now folded and pressed to his forehead, as though in desperate prayer. And finally at his face.

Now the priest was no more than a dark speck agitating in the greater heights of the dark tower. Soon he was nothing at all. Below, the three figures had absconded to their

refuge of shadows, and the vast chamber appeared empty once more. Then everything went black.

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My fever grew worse over the course of several more days, and then late one night it suddenly, quite unexpectedly, broke. Exhausted by the ordeals of my delirium, I lay buried in my bed beneath heavy blankets, whose usually numerous layers had been supplemented according to the ministrations of my mother. Just a few moments before, or a few millennia, she had gone out of my room, believing that I was at last asleep. But I had not even come near to sleeping, no more than I approached a normal state of wakefulness. The only illumination in my room was the natural nightlight of the moon shining through the windows. Through half-closed eyes I focused on this light, suspecting strange things about it, until I finally noticed that all the curtains in my room had been tightly drawn, that the pale glow at the foot of my bed was an unnatural phosphorescence, an infernal aura or angelic halo beaming about the form of Father Sevich himself.

In my confusion I greeted him, trying to lift my head from its pillow but falling back in weakness. He showed no awareness of my presence, and for a second I thought—in the hellish wanderings of my fever—that *I* was the revenant, not he. Attempting to take a clearer account of things, I forced open my leaden eyelids with all the strength I could muster. As a reward for this effort, I witnessed with all possible acuity of my inward and outward vision the incorporeal grandeur of the specter's face. And in a moment immeasurable by earthly increments of time, I grasped every detail,

every datum and nuance of this visitor's life-history, the fantastic destiny which had culminated in the creation of this infinitely gruesome visage, one whose expression had grown rigid at the sight of unimaginable horrors and petrified into spectral stone. And in that same moment, I felt that I, too, could see what this lost soul had seen.

Now, with all the force of a planet revolving its unspeakable tonnage in the blackness of space, the face turned on its terrible axis and, while it still appeared to have no apprehension of my existence, it spoke, as if to itself alone and to its solitary doom:

Not given back as it had been given, the law of the book is broken. The law... of the book... is broken.

The specter had barely spoken the last resounding syllables of its strange pronouncement when it underwent a change. Before my eyes it began to shrivel like something thrown into a fire, and without the least indication of anguish it crinkled into nothing, as if some invisible power had suddenly decided to dispose of its work, to crumple up an aborted exercise and toss it into oblivion. And it was then that I felt my own purposes at an intersection, a fortuitous crossroads, with that savage and unseen hand. But *I* would not scorn what I had seen. My health miraculously restored, I gathered together my drawing materials and stayed up the rest of that night recording the vision. At last I had the face I was seeking.

Postscriptum

Not long after that night, I paid a visit to our parish church. As this gesture was entirely self-initiated, my parents were free to interpret it as a sign of things to come, and

no doubt they did so. The purpose of this act, however, was merely to collect a small bottle of holy water from the handsome metal cistern which dispensed this liquid to the public and which stood in the vestibule of the church. With apologies to my mother and father, I did not on this occasion actually enter the church itself. Gaining the priest-blessed solution, I hurried home, where I immediately unearthed—from the bottom of my dresser drawer—the page torn from Father Sevich's book. Both items, prayer book page and bottle of holy water, I took into the upstairs bathroom. I locked the door and placed the delicate little leaf in the bathroom sink, staring for a few moments at that wonderful woodcut. I wondered if one day I might make amends for my act of vandalism, perhaps by offering something of my own to a certain repository for such treasures in the old country. But then I recalled the fate of Father Sevich, which helped to chase the whole matter from my mind. From the uncorked bottle, I sprinkled the holy water over the precious page spread out at the bottom of the sink. For a few moments it sizzled, exactly as if I had poured a powerful acid on it, and gave off a not unpleasant vapor, an incense reeking of secret denial and privilege. Finally, it dissolved altogether. Then I knew that the game was over, the dream at an end. In the mirror above the sink I saw my own face smiling a smile of deep contentment.

The Library Of Byzantium (1991 Grimscribe Version)

First published in *Grimscribe: His Lives And Works*, 1991

Father Sevich's Visit

In whatever corner of our old house I happened to find myself, I could always sense the arrival of a priest. Even in the most distant rooms of the upper floors, those rooms which had been closed up and which were forbidden to me, I would suddenly experience a very certain feeling. The climate of my surroundings then became inexplicably altered in a manner at first vaguely troublesome and afterward rather attractive. It was as if a new presence had invaded the very echoes of the air and had entered into the mellow afternoon sunlight which fell in stripes and squares across the dark wooden floors and upon the pale contortions of the ancient wallpaper. All around me invisible games had begun. My earliest philosophy regarding the great priestly tribe was therefore not a simple one by any means; rather, it comprised a thick maze of propositions, a labyrinthine layering of systems in which abstract dread and a bizarre sort of indebtedness were forever confronting each other.

In retrospect, the prelude to Fr. Sevich's visit seems to me as crucial, and as introductory to later events, as the visit itself; so I have no qualms about lingering upon these lonely moments. For much of that day I had been secluded in my room, intently pursuing a typical activity of my early life

and in the process badly ravaging what previously had been a well-made bed. Having sharpened my pencil innumerable times, and having worn down a thick gray eraser into a stub, I was ready to give myself up as a relentless failure. The paper itself seemed to defy me, laying snares within its coarse texture to thwart my every aim. Yet this rebellious mood was a quite recent manifestation: I had been allowed to fill in nearly the entire scene before this breakdown in relations between myself and my materials.

The completed portion of my drawing was an intense impression of a monastic fantasy, evoking the cloistral tunnels and the vaulted penetralia without attempting a guide-book representation of them. Nevertheless, the absolute precision of two specific elements in the picture was very much on my mind. The first of these was a single row of columns receding in sharp perspective, a diminishing file of rigid sentinels starkly etched into the surrounding gloom. The second element was a figure who had hidden himself behind one of these columns and was peering out of the shadows at something frightful beyond the immediate scene. Only the figure's face and a single column-clutching hand were to be rendered. The hand I executed well enough, but when it came to the necessary features of fear which needed to be implanted on that countenance there was simply no way to capture the desired effect. My wish was to have every detail of the unseen horror clearly readable in the facial expression of the seer himself, a maddening task and, at the time, a futile one. Every manipulation of my soft-pointed pencil betrayed me, masking my victim with a series of completely irrelevant expressions. First it was misty-eyed wonder, and then a kind of cretinous bafflement. At one point the gentle-

man appeared to be smiling in an almost amiable way at his imminent doom.

Thus, one may comprehend how easily I succumbed to the distraction of Fr. Sevich's visit. My pencil stopped dead on the paper, my eyes began to wander about, checking the curtains, the corners, and the open closet for something that had come to play hide-and-seek with me. I heard footsteps methodically treading down the long hallway and stopping at my bedroom door. My father's voice, muffled by solid wood, instructed me to make an appearance downstairs. There was a visitor.

My frustrations of that afternoon must have disadvantaged me somewhat, because I completely fell into the trap of expectation: that is, I believed our caller was only Fr. Orne, who often dropped by and who served as a kind of ecclesiastical familiar of our family. But when I descended the stairs and saw that strange black cloak drooping down from the many-pegged rack beside the front door, and when I saw the wide-brimmed hat of the same color hanging beside it like an age-old companion, I realized my error.

From the parlor came the sound of soft conversation, the softest part of which was supplied by Fr. Sevich himself, whose speaking voice was no more than a sleepy whisper. He was seated, quite fairly, in one of our most expansive armchairs, toward which destination my mother maneuvered me as soon as I entered the room. During the presentation I was silent, and for a few suspenseful moments afterward continued to remain so. Fr. Sevich thought that I was fascinated into muteness by his fancy walking stick, and he said as much. At that moment the priest's voice was infiltrated, to my amazement, by a foreign accent I had not previously no-

ticed. He handed his cane over to me for examination, and I hefted the formidable length of wood a few times. However, the real source of my fascination lay not in his personal accessories, but in the priest's own person, specifically in the chalky-looking texture of his very round face.

Invited to join the afternoon gathering, I was seated in a chair identical to the one supporting Fr. Sevich's bulk, and angled slightly toward it. But my alliance to this group was in body only: I contributed not a word to the ensuing conversation, nor did I understand those words that now filled the parlor with their drowsy music. My concentration on the priest's face had wholly exiled me from the world of good manners and polite talk. It was not just the pale and powdery cast of his complexion, but also a certain emptiness, a look of incompleteness that made me think of some unfinished effigy in a toymaker's workshop. The priest smiled and squinted and performed several other common manipulations, none of which resulted in a true facial expression. Something vital to expression was missing, some essential spirit in which all expressions are born and evolve toward their unique destiny. And, to put it graphically, his flesh simply did not have the appearance of flesh.

At some point my mother and father found an excuse to leave me alone with Fr. Sevich, presumably to allow his influence to have a free reign over me, so that his sacerdotal presence might not be adulterated by the profanity of theirs. This development was in no way surprising, since it was my parents' secret hope that someday my life would take me at least as far as seminary school, if not beyond that into the purple-robed mysteries of priesthood.

In the first few seconds after my parents had abandoned the scene, Fr. Sevich and I looked each other over, almost as if our previous introduction had counted for naught. And soon a very interesting thing happened: Fr. Sevich's face underwent a change, one in favor of the soul which had formerly been interred within his most obscure depths. Now, from out of that chalky tomb emerged a face of true expression, a masterly composition of animated eyes, living mouth, and newly flushed cheeks. This transformation, however, must have been achieved at a certain cost; for what his face gained in vitality, the priest's voice lost in volume. His words now sounded like those of a hopeless invalid, withered things reeking of medicines and prayers. What their exact topic of discourse was I'm not completely sure, but I do recall that my drawings were touched upon. Fr. Orne, of course, was already familiar with these fledgling works, and it seemed that something in their pictorial nature had caused him to mention them to his colleague who was visiting us from the old country. Something had caused Fr. Orne to single my pictures out, as it were, among the sights of his parish. Fr. Sevich spoke of those scribblings of mine in a highly circuitous and rarefied fashion, as if they were a painfully delicate subject which threatened a breach in our acquaintanceship. I did not grasp what constituted his tortuous and subtle interest in my pictures, but this issue was somewhat clarified when he showed me something: a little book he was carrying within the intricate folds of his clerical frock.

The covering of the book had the appearance of varnished wood, all darkish and embellished with undulating grains. At first I thought that this object would feel every bit

as brittle as it looked, until Fr. Sevich actually placed it in my hands and allowed me to discover that its deceptive binding was in fact extremely supple, even slippery. There were no words on the front of the book, only two thin black lines which intersected to create a cross. On closer examination,

I observed that the horizontal beam of the cross had, on either end, squiggly little extensions resembling tiny hands. And the vertical beam appeared to widen at its vertex into something like a little bulb, so that the black decoration formed a sort of stickman.

At Fr. Sevich's instruction, I randomly opened the book and thumbed over several of its incredibly thin pages, which were more like layers of living tissue than dead pulp. There seemed to be an infinite number of them, with no possibility of ever reaching the beginning or the end of the volume merely by turning over the pages one by one. The priest warned me to be careful and not to harm any of these delicate leaves, for the book was very old, very fragile, and unusually precious.

The language in which the book was written resisted all but imaginary identifications by one who was as limited in years and learning as I was then. Even now, memory will not permit me to improve upon my initial speculation that the book was composed in some exotic tongue of antiquity. But its profusion of pictures alleviated many frustrations and illuminated the darkness of the book's secret symbols. In these examples of the art of the woodcut, I could almost read that collection of sermons, of prayers and homilies, every one of which devoted itself with a single-minded insistence to wearing away at a single theme: salvation through suffering.

It was this chamber of sacred horrors that Fr. Sevich believed would catch my eye and my interest. How few of us, he explained, really understood the holy purpose of such images of torment, the divine destiny toward which the paths of anguish have always led. The production, and even the mere contemplation, of these missals of blessed agony was one of the great lost arts, he openly lamented. Then he began to tell me about a certain library in the old country, but my attention was already wandering along its own paths, and my eye was inextricably caught by the dense landscape of these old woodcuts. One scene in particular appeared exemplary of the book's soul.

The central figure in this illustration was bearded and emaciated, with his head bowed, hands folded, and knees bent. Contracted in an attitude of prayerful pleading, he seemed to be suspended in mid-air. All around this bony ascetic were torturing demons, surprisingly effective owing to, or perhaps despite, the artist's brutal technique and the sparseness of precise detail. An exception to this general rule of style was a single squatting devil whose single eye had clusters of perfect little eyes growing out of it; and each of the smaller eyes had its own bristling lashes that sprouted like weeds, an explosion of minute grotesquerie. (And now that I reflect on the matter, all of the illustrations that I saw contained at least one such exception.) The ascetic's own eyes were the focus of his particular form: stark white openings in an otherwise dark face, with two tiny pupils rolling deliriously heavenward. But what was it about the transports written on this face which inspired in me the sense of things other than fear, or pain, or even piety? In any event, I did find inspiration in this terrible scene, and tried to make

an imprint of it upon the photographic plates of my memory. With a tight grip of my index finger and thumb, I was holding the page on which this woodcut was reproduced when Fr. Sevich unexpectedly snatched the book out of my hands. I looked up, not at the priest but at my mother and father now returning to the parlor after their brief and calculated absence. “Fr. Sevich was gazing in the same direction, while blindly stashing the little book back in its place; so he must not have noticed the thin leaf which was loosely draped over my fingers and which I immediately concealed between my legs. At any rate, he said nothing about the mishap. And at the time I could not imagine that any power on earth could perceive the loss of a single page from the monstrously dense and prodigious layers of that book. Certainly I was safe from the eyes of Fr. Sevich, which had once again become as dull and expressionless as the plaster complexion of his face.

Shortly thereafter the priest had to be on his way. With fascination I watched as he assembled himself in our foyer, donning his cloak, his huge hat, propping himself with his walking stick. Before leaving, he invited us all to visit him in the old country, and we promised to do so should our travels ever take us to that part of the world. While my mother held me close to her side, my father opened the door for the priest. And the sunny afternoon, now grown windy and overcast, received him.

Father Sevich's Return

The stolen woodcut from the priest's prayerbook was not the solution I thought it would be. Although I suspected that it possessed certain inspirational powers, a modest fund of

moral energy, I soon found that the macabre icon withheld its blessings from outsiders. Perhaps I should have been more deeply acquainted with the secretive nature of sacred objects, but I was too infatuated with all the marvelous lessons I believed it could teach-above all, how I might provide my faceless man in the monastery with a countenance of true terror. However, I learned no such lessons and was forced to leave my figure in an unfinished state, a ridiculously empty slate which I remained unable to embellish with the absolute horror of an off-stage atrocity. But the picture, I mean the one in the prayerbook, did have another and unsuspected value for me. Since I had already established a spiritual rapport with Fr. Sevich, I could not obstruct a certain awareness of his own mysteries. He soon became connected in my mind with unarticulated narratives of a certain kind, stories in the rough, and ones potentially epic, even cosmic, in scope. Without a doubt there was an aura of legend about him, a cycle of mute, incredible lore; and I resolved that his future movements merited my closest possible attention. Such a difficult undertaking was made infinitely easier due to my possession of that single and very thin page torn from his prayerbook.

I kept it with me at all times, protectively enclosed in some wrapping tissue I borrowed from my mother. The initial results were soon in coming, but at the same time they were not entirely successful, considering the expense of this rather prodigal burst of psychic effort. Hence, the early scenes were highly imperfect, visions easily dispersed, fragmentary, some quite near to nonsense. Among them was a visit Fr. Sevich paid another family, a morose vignette in

which the anemic priest seemed to have grown pale to the point of translucency.

And the others involved were even worse: some of them had barely materialized or were visible only as a sort of anthropomorphic mist. There was considerable improvement when Fr. Sevich was alone or in the presence of only one other person. A lengthy conversation with Fr. Orne, for example, was projected in its totality; but, as in an improperly lighted photographic scene, the substance of every shape had been watered down into an eerie lividity. Also, given the nature of these visionary endeavors, the entire meeting transpired in dead silence, as if the two clergymen were merely pantomiming their parts.

And in all phases of activity, Fr. Sevich remained the model visitor from a foreign diocese, laying no new ground for scandal since his brief, though infinitely promising, visit with my parents and me. Perhaps the only occasions on which he threatened to live up to this promise, this pledge to incarnate some of those abstract myths that his character suggested to my imagination, took place during his intervals of absolute privacy. In the most unconscious hours of darkness, when the rest of the rectory's population was in slumber, Fr. Sevich would leave the austere comforts of his bed and, seating himself at a window-facing desk, would pour over the contents of a certain book, turning page after page and stopping every so often to mouth some of the strange words inscribed upon them. Somehow these were the sentences of his own mysterious biography, a chronicle of truly unspeakable things. In the formation of the priest's lips as he mimed the incantations of a dead language, in the darting movements of his tongue between rows of immaculate teeth,

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When Fr. Sevich returned to his homeland, I lost all touch with his life's whereabouts, and soon my own life collapsed back into established routine. After that weary and fruitless summer had passed, it was time for me to begin another year of school, to encounter once again the oppressive mysteries of the autumn season. But I had not entirely forgotten my adventure with Fr. Sevich. At the height of the fall semester we began to draw pumpkins with thick orange crayons whose points were awkwardly blunt, and with dull scissors we shaped black cats from the formless depths of black paper. Succumbing to a hopeless urge for innovation, I created a man-shaped silhouette with my paper and scissors. The just proportions of my handiwork even received compliments from the nun who served as our art instructor. But when I trimmed the figure with a tiny white collar and gave it a crudely screaming mouth-there was outrage and there was punishment. Without arguing a happy sequence of cause and effect between this incident and what followed, it was not long afterward that the school season, for me, became eventful with illness. And it was during this time of

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With hat and cloak and walking stick, the old priest was hobbling along rather briskly, and alone, down the narrow, nocturnal streets of some very old town in the old country.

It was a fairy-tale vision to which not even the most loving illustrator of medieval legends could do justice. Fortunately, the town itself—the serpentine lanes, the distorted glow of streetlamps, the superimposed confusion of pointed roofs, the thinnest blade of moon which seemed to belong to this town as it belonged to no other place on earth—does not require any protracted emphasis in this memoir. Although it did not give away its identity, either in name or location, the town still demanded a designation of some kind, some official title, however much in error it might be. And of all the names that had ever been attached to places of this world, the only one which seemed proper, in its delirious way, was an ancient name which, after all these years, seems no less fitting and no less ludicrous now than it did then. Unmentionably ludicrous, so I will not mention it.

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ows that were draped and fluttering upon those high walls was an opening; passing through this doubtful gate, the old priest continued his incredible rambling about the darkest and most remote quarters of the old town.

Now he was descending a stairway of cut stone which led below the level of the town's streets; then a brief tunnel brought him to another stairway which burrowed in a spiral down into the earth and absolute blackness. Knowing his way, the priest ultimately emerged from this nowhere of blackness when he suddenly entered a vast circular chamber. The place appeared to be a tower sunken beneath the town and soaring to a great and paradoxical height. In the upper reaches of the tower, tiny lights glimmered like stars and threw down their illumination in a patternless weave of criss-crossing strands.

The subterranean structure, at whose center Fr. Sevich now stood, ascended in a series of terraces, each bordered by a shining balustrade made of some golden metal and each travelling the circumference of the inner chamber. These terraces multiplied into the upward distance, contracting in perspective in to smaller and thinner circles, blurring together at some point and becoming lost in clouds of shadows that hovered far above. Each level was furthermore provided with numerous and regularly spaced portals, all of them dark, hinting at nothing of what lay beyond their unguarded thresholds. But one might surmise that if this was the library of which the priest spoke, if this was a true repository of such books as the one he had just removed from under his cloak, then those slender openings must have led to the archives of this fantastic athenaeum, suggesting nothing less than a bibliographic honeycomb of unknown expanse and

complexity. Scanning the shadows about him, the priest seemed to be anticipating the appearance of someone in charge, someone entrusted with care of this institution. Then one of the shadows, one of the most sizeable shadows and the one closest to the priest, turned around… and three such caretakers now stood before him.

This triumvirate of figures seemed to share the same face, which was almost a caricature of serenity. They were attired very much like the priest himself, and their eyes were large and calm. When the priest held out the book to the one in the middle, a hand moved forward to take it, a hand as white as the whitest glove. The central figure then rested its other hand flat upon the front of the book, and then the figure to the left extended a hand which laid itself upon the first; then a third hand, belonging to the third figure, covered them both with its soft white palm and long fingers, uniting the three. The hands remained thus placed for some time, as if an invisible transference of fabulously subtle powers was occurring, something being given or received. The heads of the three figures slowly turned toward one another, and simultaneously there was a change in the atmosphere of the chamber streaked with the chaotic rays of underworld starlight. And if forced to name this new quality and point to its outward sign, one might draw attention to a certain look in the large eyes of the three caretakers, a certain expression of rarefied scorn or disgust.

They removed their hands from the book and placed them once again out of view. Then the caretakers turned their eyes upon the priest, who had already moved a few steps away from these indignant shadows. But as the priest began to turn his back on them, almost precisely at the mid-

point of his pivot, he seemed to freeze abruptly in position, like someone who has just heard his name called out to him in some strange place far from home. However, he did not remain thus transfixed for very long, this statue poised to take a step which is forbidden to it, with its face as rigid and pale as a monument's stone. Soon his black, ankle-high shoes began to kick about as they left the solid ground. And when the priest had risen a little higher, well into the absolute insecurity of empty air, he lost hold of his walking stick; and it fell to the great empty expanse of the tower's floor, where it looked as small as a twig or a pencil. His wide-brimmed hat soon followed, settling crown-up beside the cane, as the priest began tossing and turning in the air like a restless sleeper, wrapping himself up in the dark cocoon of his cloak. Then the cloak was torn away, but not by the thrashing priest. Something else was up there with him, ascending the uncountable tiers of the tower, or perhaps many unseen things which tore at his clothes, at the sparse locks of his hair, at the interlocking fingers of his hands which were now folded and pressed to his forehead, as though in desperate pra:yer. And finally at his face.

Now the priest was no more than a dark speck agitating in the greater heights of the dark tower. Soon he was nothing at all. Below, the three figures had absconded to their refuge of shadows, and the vast chamber appeared empty once more. Then everything went black.

My fever grew worse over the course of several more days, and then late one night it suddenly, quite unexpectedly, broke. Exhausted by the ordeals of my delirium, I lay buried in my bed beneath heavy blankets, whose usually numerous layers had been supplemented according to the ministra-

tions of my mother. Just a few moments before, or a few millenia, she had gone out of my room, believing that I was at last asleep. But I had not even come near to sleeping, no more than I approached a normal state of wakefulness. The only illumination in my room was the natural nightlight of the moon shining through the windows. Through half-closed eyes I focused on this light, suspecting strange things about it, until I finally noticed that all the curtains in my room had been tightly drawn, that the pale glow at the foot of my bed was an unnatural phosphorescence, an infernal aura or angelic halo beaming about the form of Fr. Sevich himself.

In my confusion I greeted him, trying to lift my head from its pillow but falling back in weakness. He showed no awareness of my presence, and for a second I thought-in the hellish wanderings of my fever-that I was the revenant, not he. Attempting to take a clearer account of things, I forced open my leaden eyelids with all the strength I could muster. As a reward for this effort, I witnessed with all possible acuity of my inward and outward vision the incorporeal grandeur of the specter's face. And in a moment unmeasurable by earthly increments of time, I grasped every detail, every datum and nuance of this visitor's life-history, the fantastic destiny which had culminated in the creation of this infinitely gruesome... visage: a visage grown rigid at the sight of unimaginable horrors, a visage petrified into spectral stone. And in that same moment, I felt that I too could see what this lost soul had seen.

Now, with all the force of a planet revolving its unspeakable tonnage in the blackness of space, the face turned on its terrible axis and, while it still appeared to have no apprehen-

sion of my existence, it spoke, as if to itself alone and to its solitary doom:

Not given back as it had been given, the law of the book is broken. The law... of the book... is broken.

The spectre had barely spoken the last resounding syllables of its strange pronouncement, when it underwent a change: before my eyes it began to shrivel like something thrown into a fire; without the least expression of anguish it crinkled into nothing, as if some invisible power had suddenly decided to dispose of its work, to crumple up an aborted exercise and toss it into oblivion. And it was then that I felt my own purposes at an intersection, a fortuitous crossroads, with that savage and unseen hand. But I would not scorn what I had seen. My health miraculously restored, I gathered together my drawing materials and stayed up the rest of that night recording the vision. At last I had the face I was seeking.

Postscriptum

Not long after that night, I paid a visit to our parish church. As this gesture was entirely self-initiated, my parents were free to interpret it as a sign of things to come, and no doubt they did so. The purpose of this act, however, was merely to collect a small bottle of holy water from the handsome metal cistern which dispensed this liquid to the public and which stood in the vestibule of the church. With apologies to my mother and father, I did not on this occasion actually enter the church itself. Gaining the priest-blessed solution, I hurried home, where I immediately unearthed—from the bottom of my dresser drawer—the folio torn from Fr. Sevich's book. Both items, prayerbook page and bottle of

holy water, I took into the upstairs bathroom. I locked the door and placed the delicate little leaf in the bathroom sink, staring for a few moments at that wonderful woodcut. I wondered if one day I might make amends for my act of vandalism, perhaps by offering something of my own to a certain repository for such treasures in the old country. But then I recalled the fate of Fr. Sevich, which helped to chase the whole matter from my mind. From the uncorked bottle, I sprinkled the holy water over the precious page spread out at the bottom of the sink. For a few moments it sizzled, exactly as if I had poured a powerful acid on it, and gave off a not unpleasant vapor, an incense reeking of secret denial and privilege. Finally, it dissolved altogether. Then I knew that the game was over, the dream at an end. In the mirror above the sink I saw my own face smiling a smile of deep contentment.

The Medusa (2011 Noctuary Version)

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I

Before leaving his room Lucian Dregler transcribed a few stray thoughts into his notebook.

> The sinister, the terrible never deceive: the state in which they leave us is always one of enlightenment. And only this condition of vicious insight allows us a full grasp of the world, *a*ll things considered, just as a frigid melancholy grants us full possession of ourselves.
>
> We may hide from horror only in the heart of horror.
>
> Could I be so unique among dreamers, having courted the Medusa—my first and oldest companion—to the exclusion of all others? Would I have her respond to this sweet talk?

Relieved to have these fragments safely on the page rather than in some precarious mental notebook, where they were likely to become smudged or altogether effaced, Dregler slipped into an old overcoat, locked the door of his room behind him, and exited down a series of staircases at the back of his apartment building. An angular pattern of streets and alleys was his usual route to a certain place he

now and then visited, though for time's sake he took a shorter course that night. He was meeting an acquaintance he had not seen in quite a while.

The place was dark, and its patrons packed close to one another. Dregler paused at the doorway, slowly but unsystematically removing his gloves, while his vision worked with the faint halos of illumination offered by lamps of tarnished metal, which were spaced so widely along the walls that the light of one lamp seemed barely to link up and propagate that of its neighbor. Gradually, then, the darkness sifted away, revealing the shapes beneath it: a beaming forehead with the glitter of wire-rimmed eyeglasses below, cigarette-holding and beringed fingers lying asleep on a table, shoes of shining leather which ticked lightly against Dregler's own as he now passed cautiously through the room. At the back stood a column of stairs coiling up to another level, which was more an appended platform, a little brow of balcony, than a section of the establishment proper. This level was caged in at its brink with a railing constructed of the same rather wiry and fragile material as the stairway, giving this area the appearance of a makeshift scaffolding. Rather slowly, Dregler ascended the stairs.

“Good evening, Joseph,” Dregler said to the man seated at the table beside an unusually tall and narrow window. Joseph Gleer stared for a moment at the gloves Dregler had tossed onto the table.

“You still have those same old gloves,” he replied to the greeting, then lifted his gaze, grinning: “And that overcoat!”

Gleer stood up and the two men shook hands. Then they both sat down and Gleer, indicating the empty glass between them on the table, asked Dregler if he still drank brandy.

Dregler nodded, and Gleer said “Coming up” before leaning over the rail a little ways and holding out two fingers in view of someone in the shadows below.

“Is this just a sentimental symposium, Joseph?” inquired the now uncoated Dregler.

“In part. Wait until we've got our drinks, so you can properly congratulate me.”

Dregler nodded again, scanning Gleer's face without any observable upsurge in curiosity. A former colleague from Dregler's teaching days, Gleer had always possessed an open zest for minor intrigues, academic or otherwise, and an addiction to the details of ritual and protocol, anything preformulated and with precedent. He also had a liking for petty secrets, as long as he was among those privy to them. For instance, in discussions—no matter if the subject was philosophy or old films—Gleer took an obvious delight in revealing, usually at some advanced stage of the dispute, that he had quite knowingly supported some treacherously absurd school of thought. His perversity confessed, he would then assist, and even surpass, his opponent in demolishing what was left of his old position, supposedly for the greater glory of disinterested intellects everywhere. But at the same time, Dregler saw perfectly well what Gleer was up to. And though it was not always easy to play into Gleer's hands, it was this secret counter-knowledge that provided Dregler's sole amusement in these mental contests, for

Nothing that asks for your arguments is worth arguing, just as nothing that solicits your belief is worth believing. The real and the unreal lovingly cohabit in our terror, the only “sphere” that matters.

Perhaps secretiveness, then, was the basis of the two men's relationship, a flawed secretiveness in Gleer's case, a consummate one in Dregler's.

Now here he was, Gleer, keeping Dregler in so-called suspense. His eyes, Dregler's, were aimed at the tall narrow window, beyond which were the bare upper branches of an elm that twisted with spectral movements under the floodlights fixed high upon the outside wall. But every few moments Dregler glanced at Gleer, whose chubby features were so remarkably unchanged: the cupid's bow lips, the cookie-dough cheeks, the tiny gray eyes now almost buried within the flesh of a face too often screwed up with laughter.

A woman with two glasses on a cork-bottomed tray was standing over the table. While Gleer paid for the drinks, Dregler lifted his and held it in the position of a lazy salute. The woman who had brought the drinks looked briefly and without expression at toastmaster Dregler. Then she went away and Dregler, with false ignorance, said: “To your upcoming or recently passed event, whatever it may be or have been.”

“I hope it will be for life this time, thank you, Lucian.”

“What is this, quintus?”

“*Quartus*, if you don't mind.”

“Of course, my memory is as bad as my powers of observation. Actually I was looking for something shining on your finger, when I should have seen the shine of your eyes. No ring, though, from the bride?”

Gleer reached into the open neck of his shirt and pulled out a length of delicate chainwork, dangling at the end of which was a tiny rose-colored diamond in a plain silver setting.

“Modern innovations,” he said neutrally, replacing the chain and stone. “The moderns must have them, I suppose, but marriage is still marriage.”

“Here's to the Middle Ages,” Dregler said with unashamed weariness.

“And the middle-aged,” refrained Gleer.

The men sat in silence for some moments. Dregler's eyes moved once more around that shadowy loft, where a few tables shared the light of a single lamp. Most of its dim glow backfired onto the wall, revealing the concentric coils of the wood's knotty surface. Taking a calm sip of his drink, Dregler waited.

“Lucian,” Gleer finally began in a voice so quiet that it was nearly inaudible.

“I'm listening,” Dregler assured him.

“I didn't ask you here just to commemorate my marriage. It's been almost a year you know. Not that that would make any difference to you.”

Dregler said nothing, encouraging Gleer with receptive silence.

“Since that time,” Gleer continued, “my wife and I have both taken leaves from the university and have been traveling, mostly around the Mediterranean. We've just returned a few days ago. Would you like another drink? You went through that one rather quickly.”

“No, thank you. Please go on,” Dregler requested very politely.

After another gulp of brandy, Gleer continued. “Lucian, I've never understood your fascination with what you call the Medusa. I'm not sure I care to, though I've never told you that. But through no deliberate efforts of my own, let me

emphasize, I think I can further your, I guess you could say, pursuit. You are still interested in the matter, aren't you?"

"Yes, but I'm too poor to afford Peloponnesian jaunts like the one you and your wife have just returned from. Was that what you had in mind?"

"Not at all. You needn't even leave town, which is the strange part, the real beauty of it. It's very complicated how I know what I know. Wait a second. Here, take this."

Gleer now produced an object he had earlier stowed away somewhere in the darkness, laying it on the table. Dregler stared at the book. It was bound in a rust-colored cloth and the gold lettering across its spine was flaking away. From what Dregler could make out of the remaining fragments of the letters, the title of the book seemed to be: *Electro-Dynamics for the Beginner*.

"What is this supposed to be?" he asked Gleer.

"Only a kind of passport, meaningless in itself. This is going to sound ridiculous—how I know it!—but you want to bring the book to this establishment," said Gleer, placing a business card upon the book's front cover, "and ask the owner how much he'll give you for it. I know you go to these shops all the time. Are you familiar with it?"

"Only vaguely," replied Dregler.

The establishment in question, as the business card read, was *Brothers' Bookstore: Dealers in Rare and Antiquarian Books, Libraries and Collections Purchased, Large Stock of Esoteric Volumes and Civil War, No Appointment Needed, Member of Manhattan Society of Philosophical Bookdealers, Benjamin Brothers, Founder and Owner.*

"I'm told that the proprietor of this place knows you by your writings," said Gleer, adding in an ambiguous mono-

tone: “He thinks you're a real philosopher. Anyhow, you're supposed to show up there at noon tomorrow.”

Dregler gazed at Gleer, his long fingers abstractedly fiddling with the little card. “Are you telling me that the Medusa is supposed to be a book?” he said.

Gleer stared down at the tabletop and then looked up. “I'm not telling you anything I do not know for certain, which is not a great deal. As far as I know, it could still be anything you can imagine, and perhaps already have. Of course you can take this imperfect information however you like, as I'm sure you will. If you want to know more than I do, then pay a visit to this bookstore.”

“Who told you to tell me this?” Dregler calmly asked.

“It seems better if I don't say anything about that, Lucian. Might spoil the show, so to speak.”

“‘Very well,” said Dregler, pulling out his wallet and inserting the business card into it. He stood up and began putting on his coat. “Is that all, then? I don't mean to be rude but—”

“Why should you be any different from your usual self? One more thing I should tell you, though. Please sit down. Now listen to me. We've known each other a long time, Lucian. And I know how much this means to you. So whatever happens, or doesn't happen, I don't want you to hold me responsible. I've only done what I thought you yourself would want me to do. Well, tell me if I was right.”

Dregler stood up again and tucked the book under his arm. “Yes, I suppose. But I'm sure we'll be seeing each other. Good night, Joseph.”

“One more drink,” offered Gleer.

“No, good night,” answered Dregler.

As he started away from the table, Dregler, to his embarrassment, nearly rapped his head against a massive wooden beam which hung hazardously low in the darkness. He glanced back to see if Gleer had noticed this clumsy mishap. And after merely a single drink! But Gleer was looking the other way, gazing out the window at the tangled tendrils of the elm and the livid complexion cast upon it by the floodlights fixed high upon the outside wall.

For some time Dregler thoughtlessly observed the windblown trees outside the window of his bedroom before turning away to stretch out on his bed. Beside him now was a copy of his first book, *Meditations on the Medusa*. He picked it up and read piecemeal from its pages.

The worshipers of the Medusa, including those who clog pages with "insights" and interpretations such as these, are the most hideous citizens of this earth—and the most numerous. But how many of them *know* themselves as such? Conceivably there may be an inner cult of the Medusa, but then again: who could dwell on the existence of such beings for the length of time necessary to round them up for execution?

> It is possible that only the dead are not in league with the Medusa. We, on the other hand, are her allies—but always against ourselves. How does one become her *companion*... and live?
>
> We are never in danger of beholding the Medusa. For that to happen she needs our consent. But a far greater disaster awaits those who know the Medusa to be gazing at them and long to reciprocate in kind. What better definition of a marked man: one who

> "has eyes" for the Medusa, whose eyes have a will and a fate of their own.
>
> Ah, to be a thing without eyes. What a break to be *born* a stone!

Dregler closed the book and then replaced it on one of the shelves across the room. On that same shelf was a fat folder stuffed with loose pages. Dregler brought this back to the bed with him and began rummaging through it. Over the years the file had grown enormously, beginning as a few random memoranda—clippings, photographs, miscellaneous references which Dregler copied out by hand—and expanding into a storehouse of infernal serendipity, a testament of terrible coincidence. And the subject of every entry in this inadvertent encyclopedia was the Medusa herself.

Some of the documents fell into a section marked "Facetious," including a comic book (which Dregler picked off a drugstore rack) that featured the Medusa as a benevolent superheroine who used her hideous powers only on equally hideous foes in a world without beauty. Others belonged under the heading of "Irrelevant," where was placed a three-inch strip from a decades-old sports page lauding the winning season of a three-year-old colt named Mr. Medusa. There was also a meager division of the file which had no official designation, but which Dregler could not help regarding as items of "True Horror." Prominent among these was a feature article from a British scandal sheet: a photoless chronicle of a man's year-long suspicion that his wife was periodically possessed by the serpent-headed demon, a senseless little guignol which terminated with the wife's de-

capitation while she lay sleeping one night and the subsequent incarceration of a madman.

One of the least creditable subclasses of the file consisted of pseudo-data taken from the less legitimate propagators of mankind's knowledge: renegade "scientific" journals, occult-anthropology newsletters, and publications of various centers of sundry studies. Contributions to the file from periodicals such as *The Excentaur*, a back issue of which Dregler stumbled across at none other than Brothers' Bookstore, were collectively categorized as "Medusa and Medusans: Sightings and Material Explanations." An early number of this publication included an article which attributed the birth of the Medusa, and of all life on Earth, to one of many extraterrestrial visitors for whom this planet had been a sort of truck stop or comfort station en route to other locales in other galactic systems.

All such enlightening finds Dregler relished with a surly joy, especially those proclamations from the high priests of the human mind and soul, who invariably relegated the Medusa to a psychic underworld where she served as the image par excellence of romantic panic. But unique among the curiosities he cherished was an outburst of prose whose author seemed to follow in Dregler's own footsteps: a man *after his own heart*. "Can we be delivered," this writer rhetorically queried, "from the 'life force' as symbolized by Medusa? Can this energy, if such a thing exists, be put to death, crushed? Can we, in the arena of our being, come stomping out—gladiator-like—net and trident in hand, and, poking and swooping, pricking and swishing, *torment* this soulless and hideous demon into an excruciating madness, and, finally, annihilate it to the thumbs-down delight of our nerves and

to our soul's deafening applause?" Unfortunately, however, these words were written in the meanest spirit of sarcasm by a critic who parodically reviewed Dregler's own *Meditations on the Medusa* when it first appeared twenty years earlier.

But Dregler never sought out reviews of his books, and the curious thing, the amazing thing, was that this item, like all the other bulletins and ponderings on the Medusa, had merely fallen into his hands unbidden. (In a dentist's office, of all places.) Though he had read widely in the lore of and commentary on the Medusa, none of the material in his rather haphazard file was attained through the normal channels of research. None of it was gained in an official manner, none of it foreseen. In the fewest words, it was all a gift of unforeseen circumstances, strictly unofficial matter.

But what did this prove, exactly, that he continued to be offered these pieces to his puzzle? It proved nothing, exactly or otherwise, and was merely a side-effect of his preoccupation with a peculiar subject. Naturally he would be alert to its intermittent cameos on the stage of daily routine. This was normal. But although these "finds" proved nothing, rationally, they were highly suggestive to Dregler's imagination, especially when he pored over the collective contents of these archives devoted to his oldest companion.

It was, in fact, a reference to the imagery for which he was now searching as he lay on his bed. And there it was, a paragraph he had once copied in the library from a little yellow book entitled *Things Near and Far*. "There is nothing in the nature of things," the quotation ran, "to prevent a man from seeing a dragon or a griffin, a gorgon or a unicorn. Nobody as a matter of fact has seen a woman whose hair consisted of snakes, nor a horse from whose forehead a horn

projected; though very early man probably did see dragons—known to science as pterodactyls—and monsters more improbable than griffins. At any rate, none of these zoological fancies violates the fundamental laws of the intellect; the monsters of heraldry and mythology do not exist, but there is no reason in the nature of things nor in the laws of the mind why they should not exist."

It was therefore in line with the nature of things that Dregler suspended all judgments until he could pay a visit to a certain bookstore.

II

It was late the following afternoon, after he emerged from daylong doubts and procrastinations, that Dregler entered a little shop squeezed between a gray building and a brown one. Nearly within arm's reach of each other, the opposing walls of the shop were solid with books. The higher shelves were attainable only by means of a very tall ladder, and the highest shelves were apparently not intended for access. Back numbers of old magazines—*Blackwood's*, *The Spectator*, the London and American *Mercury*'s—were stacked in plump, disordered piles by the front window, their pulpy covers dying in the sunlight. Missing pages from forgotten novels were stuck forever to a patch of floor or curled up in corners. Dregler noted page two-hundred-and-two of *The Second Staircase* at his feet, and he could not help feeling a sardonic sympathy for the anonymous pair of eyes confronting an unexpected dead end in the narrative of that old mystery. Then again, he wondered how many thousands of these volumes had already been browsed for the last time. This included, of course, the one he held in his own hand and for

which he now succumbed to a brief and absurd sense of protectiveness. Dregler blamed his friend Gleer for this subtle aspect of what he suspected was a farce of far larger and cruder design.

Sitting behind a low counter in the telescopic distance of the rear of the store, a small and flabby man with wire-rimmed eyeglasses was watching him. When Dregler approached the counter and laid the book upon it, the man—Benjamin Brothers—hopped alertly to his feet.

"Help you?" he asked. The bright tone of his voice was the formal and familiar greeting of an old servant.

Dregler nodded, vaguely recognizing the little man from a previous visit to his store some years ago. He adjusted the book on the counter, simply to draw attention to it, and said: "I don't suppose it was worth my trouble to bring this sort of thing here."

The man smiled politely. "You're correct in that, sir. Old texts like that, worth practically nothing. Now down there in my basement," he said, gesturing toward a narrow doorway, "I've got literally thousands of things like that. Other things, too, you know. *The Bookseller's Trade* called it 'Benny's Treasure House.' But maybe you're just interested in *selling* books today."

"Well, it seems that as long as I'm here…"

"Help yourself, Professor Dregler," the man said warmly as Dregler started toward the stairway. Hearing himself being so formally addressed, Dregler paused and nodded back at the book dealer; then he proceeded down the stairs.

Dregler now recalled this basement repository, along with the three lengthy flights of stairs needed to reach its unusual depths. The bookstore at street-level was no more

than a messy little closet in comparison to the expansive disorder down below: a cavern of clutter, all heaps and mounds, with bulging tiers of bookshelves laid out according to no easily observable scheme. It was a universe constructed solely of the softly jagged brickwork of books. But if the Medusa was a book, how would he ever find it in this chaos? And if it was not, what other definite form could he expect to encounter of a phenomenon which he had avoided precisely defining all these years, one whose most nearly exact emblem was a hideous woman with a head of serpents?

For some time he merely wandered around the crooked aisles and deep niches of the basement. Every so often he took down some book whose appearance caught his interest and dislodged it from an indistinct mass of battered spines, rescuing the volume before years rooted to the same spot caused its words to mingle and fuse with the babble of unseen pages in "Benny's Treasure House." Opening the book, he leaned a threadbare shoulder against the towering, filthy stacks. And after spending very little time in the cloistered desolation of that basement, Dregler found himself yawning openly and unconsciously scratching himself, as if he were secluded in some personal sanctum.

But suddenly he became aware of this assumption of privacy which had instilled itself in him, and the feeling instantly perished. Now his sense of a secure isolation was replaced, at all levels of creaturely response, by its opposite. For had he not written that "personal well-being serves solely to excavate within your soul a chasm which waits to be filled by a landslide of dread, an empty mold whose peculiar dimensions will one day manufacture the shape of your *unique* terror"?

Whether or not it was the case, Dregler felt that he was no longer, or perhaps never was, alone in the chaotic treasure house. But he continued acting as if he were, omitting only the yawns and the scratchings. Long ago he had discovered that a mild flush of panic was a condition capable of *seasoning* one's more tedious moments. So he did not immediately attempt to discourage this, probably delusory, sensation. However, like any state dependent upon the play of delicate and unfathomable forces, Dregler's mood or intuition was subject to unexpected metamorphoses.

And when Dregler's mood or intuition passed into a new phase, his surroundings followed close behind: both he and the bookshelves encompassing him simultaneously crossed the boundary which divides playful panics from those of a more lethal nature. But this is not to say that one kind of apprehension was more excusable than the other; they were equally opposed to the likings of logic. (“Regarding dread, intensity in itself is no assurance of validity.”) So it meant nothing, necessarily, that the twisting aisles of books appeared to be tightening around the suspicious bibliophile, that the shelves now looked more conspicuously swollen with their soft and musty stock, that faint shufflings and shadows seemed to be frolicking like a fugue through the dust and dimness of the underground bookstore. Could he, as he turned the next corner, be led to see that which should not be seen?

The next corner, as it happened, was the kind one is trapped in rather than turns—a cul-de-sac of bookshelves forming three walls which nearly reached the rafters of the ceiling. Dregler found himself facing the rear wall like a bad schoolboy in punishment. He gazed up and down its height

as if contemplating whether or not it was real, pondering if one could simply pass through it once one had conquered the illusion of its solidity. Just as he was about to turn and abandon this nook, something lightly brushed against his left shoulder. With involuntary suddenness he pivoted in this direction, only to feel the same airy caress now squarely across his back. Continuing counterclockwise, he executed one full revolution until he was standing and staring at someone who was standing and staring back at him from the exact spot where he, a mere moment before, had been standing.

The woman's high heels put her face at the same level as his, while her turban-like hat made her appear somewhat taller. It was fastened on one side with a metal clasp studded with watery pink stones. From beneath her hat a few strands of straw-colored hair sprouted onto an unwrinkled forehead. A pair of large sunglasses shaded her shiny red lips, and a tight-collared coat descended as a dark, elegant cylinder down to her boots. She calmly withdrew a pad of paper from one of her pockets, tore off the top page, and presented it to Dregler.

“Sorry if I startled you,” it said.

After reading the note, Dregler looked up at the woman and saw that she was gently chopping her hand against her neck, but only a few times and merely to indicate some vocal disability. Laryngitis, wondered Dregler, or something chronic? He examined the note once again and observed the name, address, and telephone number of a company that serviced furnaces and air conditioners.

The woman then tore off a second pre-written message from the pad and pressed it into Dregler's already paper-

filled palm, smiling at him very deliberately as she did so. (How he wanted to see what her eyes were doing!) She shook his hand a little before taking away hers and making a silent, scentless exit. So what was that reek Dregler detected in the air when he stared down at the note, which simply read: "Regarding M."

Below this word-and-a-half message was an address, and below that was a specified time on the following day. The handwriting was nicely formed, the most attractive Dregler had ever seen.

In the light of the past few days, Dregler almost expected to find still another note waiting for him when he returned home. It was folded in half and stuffed underneath the door to his apartment. "Dear Lucian," it began, "I owe you an apology like nobody's business. In brief—we've been had! Both of us. And by my wife, no less, along with a friend of hers. The latter is a blond-haired anthropology prof from Timbuktu U. or somewhere. The wife won't say, though I swear I saw them talking together on the Mediterranean trip I told you about. Anyhow, we'll have a laugh about the whole thing when we meet again, which I'm afraid won't be until my wife and I get back from another 'jaunt.' (Eyeing some more islands, this time in the Pacific.) Or maybe we won't.

"I was thinking that you might be skeptical enough not to go to the bookstore, but after finding you not at home I feared the worst. Hope you didn't have your hopes up. No harm done, in either case. The girls explained to me that they wanted to have a little fun with you and your Medusa fetish. In my opinion, my wife is trying to set you up with her friend—says you were made for each other. How she would know that is a mystery, unless I've told her more

about my old colleague than I can recall. But perhaps you can tell me about that, since the plan was to have you meet the woman at the bookstore. She seems harmless enough, though I don't see you giving up your reclusive ways.

"Seriously, I hope you'll forgive all of us. See you soon, tanned and pacified by a South Sea Eden."

The signature at the bottom of the note was, of course, that of Joseph Gleer.

Gleer's confession seemed sincere. But what did he know of Dregler's encounter at the bookstore? Certainly there was more to it than Gleer had knowledge, Dregler was sure of that. It was not Gleer who had become learned in the ways of the Medusa for longer than anyone knew. "This is no joke, my dear Joseph," said Dregler aloud as he grasped the note. He then took all the notes he had received that day, paper-clipped them together, and put them into a new section of his massive file. He tentatively labeled this section: "Personal Confrontations with the Medusa, Real or Apparent."

III

The address given to Dregler the day before was not too far for him to walk, restive peripatetic that he was. But for some reason he felt rather fatigued that morning, so he hired a taxi to speed him across a drizzle-darkened city. Settling into the spacious dilapidation of the taxi's back seat, he took note of a few things. Why, he wondered, were the driver's glasses, which every so often filled the rear-view mirror, even darker than the day? Did she make a practice of thus "admiring" all her passengers? And was this back-seat debris—the "L"-shaped cigarette butt on the door's armrest,

the black apple core on the floor—supposed to serve as objects of *his* admiration?

Dregler pensively stared through the taxi's windows at the ominous cast of the drenching sky and the decrepit city streets where umbrellas multiplied like mushrooms in the grayness. As the moments passed, he lost by degrees what little sense of well-being his life allotted to him on any given day. So, he was on the alert after all—frigid with rationality. The possibilities of what might lie ahead had not distracted his mind with fantasies of adventure and discovery. Earlier he was concerned that his flow of responses would *not* be those of a man who was about to confront the Medusa in some form. He was apprehensive that he might fall into a state of ecstatic anticipation, of elated hope. In brief, he feared that, like so many others obnubilated by their dreams, he would slip into insanity. To be sane, he held, was either to be sedated by melancholy or activated by hysteria, two responses which are "always and equally warranted for those of *sound* insight." All others were irrational, merely symptoms of imaginations left idle, of memories out of work. And above these mundane responses, the only elevation allowable, the only valid transcendence, was a sardonic one: a bliss that annihilated the visible universe with jeers of dark joy, a *mindful* ecstasy. Anything else in the way of "mysticism" was a sign of deviation or distraction, and a heresy to the obvious.

The taxi turned onto a block of wetted brownstones, each fronted by a lawn overhung with the skeletal branches of elms in early spring. Dregler paid the driver, who expressed no gratitude whatever, and walked quickly through the drizzle toward a pale-bricked building with black numbers—

two-oh-two—beside a door with a brass knob and knocker. Reviewing the information on the crumpled piece of paper he took from his pocket, Dregler pressed a glowing button to summon whoever was inside. There was no one else in sight along the street, its trees and pavement fragrantly damp.

The door opened just wide enough for Dregler to step inside. A shabbily dressed man of indefinite age closed the door behind him, then asked in a cordially nondescript voice: “Dregler?” The philosopher nodded in reply. After a few reactionless moments the man moved past Dregler, waving once for him to follow down the ground-floor hallway. They stopped at a door that was directly beneath the main stairway leading to the upper floors. “In here,” said the man, placing his hand upon the doorknob. Dregler noticed the ring, its rosewater stone and silver band, and the disjunction between the man's otherwise dour appearance and this comparatively striking piece of jewelry. The man pushed open the door and, without entering the room, flipped a light switch on the inside wall.

To all appearances it was an ordinary storeroom cluttered with a variety of objects. “Make yourself comfortable,” the man said as he indicated to Dregler the way into the room. “Leave whenever you like. Just close the door behind you.”

Dregler gave a quick look around the room. “Isn't there anything else?” he asked meekly, as if he were the stupidest student of the class. “This is it, then?” he persisted in a quieter, more dignified voice.

“This is it,” the man echoed softly. Then he slowly closed the door, and from inside Dregler could hear footsteps walking back down the hallway.

The room was a niche somewhere beneath the stairway leading to the upper floors, and its ceiling tapered downward into a smooth slant where angular steps ascended upward on the other side. Elsewhere its outline was obscure, confused by bed sheets shaped like lamps or tables or small horses; heaps of rocking chairs and baby-chairs and other items of disused furniture; bandaged hoses that drooped like dead pythons from hooks on the walls; animal cages whose doors hung open on a single hinge; old paint cans and tarps speckled with dried-up drippings; and a dusty light fixture that cast a gray haze over everything. There were shadows, of course, and they flickered as if created by candlelight upon the walls of a cave, writhing in all directions over curving walls. Dregler gazed around the room, picked up some small object and immediately set it down again because his hands were trembling. He found himself an old crate to sit on, kept his eyes open, and waited.

Afterward he could not remember how long he had stayed in the room, though he did manage to store up every nuance of the eventless vigil for later use in his voluntary and involuntary dreams. (They were compiled into that increasingly useful section marked "Personal Confrontations with the Medusa," a section that was fleshing itself out as a zone swirling with roping shapes and a hundred hissing voices.) Dregler recalled vividly, however, that he left the room in a state of panic after catching a glimpse of himself in an old mirror that had a hair-line fracture slithering up its center. And on his way out he lost his breath when he felt himself being pulled back into the room. But it was only a loose thread from his overcoat that had gotten caught in the

door. It finally snapped cleanly off and he was free to go, his heart livened with dread.

Dregler never let on to his friends what a success that afternoon had been for him, not that he could have explained it to them in any practical way even if he desired to. When Gleer and his wife returned from their travels in the Pacific, they invited Dregler to their house for a party that, no matter how he protested, there was no way to avoid. “Oh, you must meet my new wife,” insisted Gleer. “You're my oldest friend!” Dregler finally met Gleer's new wife and her accomplice in the “little fun” they had with him at the bookstore. (It became apparent to Dregler that no one, least of all him, would admit it had gone further than that.) Dregler was left alone with this woman only briefly, and in the corner of a crowded room. As it turned out, they each shared a variety of interests and got along, to all appearances, quite well. Though this was the first time they met, they both confessed to a feeling of a prior acquaintance without being able, or willing, to substantiate its origins.

“Maybe you were a student of mine,” Dregler suggested.

She smiled and said, “Thank you, Lucian, but I'm not as young as you seem to think.”

Then she was jostled from behind (“Whoops,” said a tipsy academic), and something she had been fiddling with in her hand ended up in Dregler's drink. It turned the clear bubbling beverage into a glassful of liquid rose-light.

“I'm so sorry. Let me get you another,” she said, and then disappeared into the crowd.

Dregler fished the earring out of the glass and stole away with it before she had a chance to return with a fresh drink.

Later in his room he placed it in a small box, which he labeled: “Treasures of the Medusa.”

But there was nothing he could prove, and he knew it.

IV

It was not many years later that Dregler was out on one of his now famous walks around the city. Since the bookstore incident, he had added several new titles to his works, and these had somehow gained him the faithful and fascinated audience of readers that had previously eluded him. Prior to his “discovery,” he had been accorded little attention among academics in his field or the cognoscenti in general. But now every little habit of his, not least of all his daily meanderings, had been turned by commentators into “typifying traits” and “defining quirks.” “Dregler's walks,” stated one article, “are a constitutional of the modern mind, urban journeys by a tortured Ulysses *sans* Ithaca.” Another article offered this back-cover superlative: “the most baroque inheritor of Existentialism's obsessions.” Milestones along the pathway to the void, Dregler's recent books—*A Bouquet of Worms*, *Banquet for Spiders*, and *New Meditations on the Medusa*—had enabled him to “grip the minds of a dying generation and pass on to them his pain.”

“We can only live by leaving our ‘soul’ in the hands of the Medusa,” Dregler wrote in *New Meditations*. “Whether she is an angel or a gargoyle is not the point. Each merely allows us a gruesome diversion from some ultimate catastrophe which would turn us to stone; each is a mask hiding the *worst* visage, a medicine that numbs the mind. And the Medusa will see to it that we are protected, sealing our eyelids closed with the gluey spittle of her snakes, while their bodies elong-

ate and slither past our lips to devour us *from the inside*. This is what we must never witness, except in the imagination, where it is a charming sight. For in the mind the Medusa fascinates much more than she appalls, and haunts us just *this side* of petrification. On the other side is the unthinkable, the unheard-of, that-which-should-not-be: hence, the Real. This is what throttles our souls with a thousand fingers—somewhere, perhaps in that dim room which caused us to forget ourselves, that place where we left ourselves behind amid shadows and strange sounds—while our minds and words toy, like playful, stupid pets, with *diversions* of an immeasurable disaster. The tragedy is that we must steer so close in order to avoid this hazard. *We may hide from horror only in the heart of horror.*"

Now Dregler had reached the outermost point of his daily walk, the point at which he usually turned and made his way back to his apartment, that o*ther* room. He gazed at the door with the brass knob and knocker, then glanced down the street at the row of porch lights and bay windows, which were glowing madly in the late dusk. Looking skyward, he saw the bluish domes of streetlamps: inverted halos or open eyes. A light rain shower began, nothing very troublesome. But in the next moment Dregler had already sought shelter in the welcoming brownstone.

He soon came to stand before the door of the room, keeping his hands deep in the pockets of his overcoat and away from temptation. Nothing had changed, he noticed, nothing at all. The door had not been opened by anyone since he had last closed it behind him on that memorable day years ago. And there was the proof, as he knew, somehow, it would be: that long thread from his coat still dangled from where it

had been caught between door and frame. Now there was no question about what he would do.

It was to be a quick peek through a hand-wide crack, but enough to risk disillusionment and the dispersal of all the enchanting traumas he had articulated in his brain and his books, scattering them like those peculiar shadows he supposed lingered in that room. And the voices—would he hear their hissing which heralded her presence in a zone swirling with roping shapes? He kept his eyes fixed upon his hand on the doorknob, turning it gently to nudge open the door. So the first thing he saw was the way it, his hand, took on a rosy dawn-like glow, then a deeper twilight crimson as it was bathed more directly by the odd illumination within the room.

There was no need to reach in and flick the light switch just inside. He could see quite enough as his vision, still exceptional, was further aided by the way a certain cracked mirror was positioned, giving his eyes a reflected entrance into the dim depths of the room. And in the depths of the mirror? A split-image, something fractured by a thread-like chasm that oozed up a viscous red glow. There was a man in the mirror; no, not a man but a manikin, or a frozen figure of some kind. It was naked and rigid, leaning against a wall of clutter, its arms outstretched and reaching behind, as if trying to break a backwards fall. Its head was also thrown back, almost broken-necked; its eyes were pressed shut into a pair of well-sealed creases, two ocular wrinkles which had taken the place of the sockets themselves. And its mouth gaped so widely with a soundless scream that all wrinkles had been smoothed away from that part of the old face.

He barely recognized this face, this naked and paralyzed form which he had all but forgotten, except as a lurid figure of speech he once used to describe the uncanny condition of his soul. But it was no longer a charming image of the imagination. Reflection had given it charm, just as reflection had made those snakes, and the one who wore them, picturesque and not petrifying. But no amount of reflection could have conceived seeing the thing itself, nor the state of being stone.

The serpents were moving now, coiling themselves about the ankles and wrists, the neck; stealthily entering the screaming man's mouth and prying at his eyes. Deep in the mirror opened another pair of eyes the tint of wine mixed with water—*the color of her cult*—and through a dark tangled mass they glared. The eyes met his, but not in a mirror. And the mouth was screaming, but made no sound. Finally, he was reunited, in the worst possible way, with the thing within the room.

Stiff inside of stone now, he heard himself think. *Where is the world, my words*? No longer any world, any words, there would only be that narrow room and its two inseparable occupants. Nothing other than that would exist for him, could exist, nor, in fact, had ever existed. In its own rose-tinted heart, his horror had at last found him.

The Medusa (1994 Noctuary Version)

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I

Before leaving his room Lucian Dregler transcribed a few stray thoughts into his notebook.

> The sinister, the terrible never deceive: the state in which they leave us is always one of enlightenment. And only this condition of vicious insight allows us a full grasp of the world, all things considered, just as a frigid melancholy grants us full possession of ourselves.
>
> We may hide from horror only in the heart of horror.
>
> Could I be so unique among dreamers, having courted the Medusa—my first and oldest companion—to the exclusion of all others? Would I have her respond to this sweet talk?

Relieved to have these fragments safely on the page rather than in some precarious mental notebook, where they were likely to become smudged or altogether effaced, Dregler slipped into an old overcoat, locked the door of his room behind him, and exited down a series of staircases at the back of his apartment building. An angular pattern of streets and alleys was his usual route to a certain place he

now and then visited, though for time's sake—in order to waste it that is—he chose to stray from his course at several points. He was meeting an acquaintance he had not seen in quite a while.

The place was very dark, though no more than in past experience, and much more populated than it first appeared to Dregler's eyes. He paused at the doorway, slowly but unsystematically removing his gloves, while his vision worked with the faint halos of illumination offered by lamps of tarnished metal, which were spaced so widely along the walls that the light of one lamp seemed barely to link up and propagate that of its neighbor. Gradually, then, the darkness sifted away, revealing the shapes beneath it: a beaming forehead with the glitter of wire-rimmed eyeglasses below, cigarette-holding and beringed fingers lying asleep on a table, shoes of shining leather which ticked lightly against Dregler's own as he now passed cautiously through the room. At the back stood a column of stairs coiling up to another level, which was more an appended platform, a little brow of balcony, than a section of the establishment proper. This level was caged in at its brink with a railing constructed of the same rather wiry and fragile material as the stairway, giving this area the appearance of a makeshift scaffolding. Rather slowly, Dregler ascended the stairs.

“Good evening, Joseph,” Dregler said to the man seated at the table beside an unusually tall and narrow window. Joseph Gleer stared for a moment at the old gloves Dregler had tossed onto the table.

“You still have those same old gloves,” he replied to the greeting, then lifted his gaze, grinning: “And that overcoat!”

Gleer stood up and the two men shook hands. Then they both sat down and Gleer, indicating the empty glass between them on the table, asked Dregler if he still drank brandy. Dregler nodded, and Gleer said “Coming up” before leaning over the rail a little ways and holding out two fingers in view of someone in the shadows below.

“Is this just a sentimental symposium, Joseph?” inquired the now uncoated Dregler.

“In part. Wait until we've got our drinks, so you can properly congratulate me.”

Dregler nodded again, scanning Gleer's face without any observable upsurge in curiosity. A former colleague from Dregler's teaching days, Gleer had always possessed an open zest for minor intrigues, academic or otherwise, and an addiction to the details of ritual and protocol, anything preformulated and with precedent. He also had a liking for petty secrets, as long as he was among those privy to them. For instance, in discussions—no matter if the subject was philosophy or old films—Gleer took an obvious delight in revealing, usually at some advanced stage of the dispute, that he had quite knowingly supported some treacherously absurd school of thought. His perversity confessed, he would then assist, and even surpass, his opponent in demolishing what was left of his old position, supposedly for the greater glory of disinterested intellects everywhere. But at the same time, Dregler saw perfectly well what Gleer was up to. And though it was not always easy to play into Gleer's hands, it was this secret counter-knowledge that provided Dregler's sole amusement in these mental contests, for

> Nothing that asks for your arguments is worth arguing, just as nothing that solicits your belief is

> worth believing. The real and the unreal lovingly cohabit in our terror, the only “sphere” that matters.

Perhaps secretiveness, then, was the basis of the two men's relationship, a flawed secretiveness in Gleer's case, a consummate one in Dregler's.

Now here he was, Gleer, keeping Dregler in so-called suspense. His eyes, Dregler's, were aimed at the tall narrow window, beyond which were the bare upper branches of an elm that twisted with spectral movements under the floodlights fixed high upon the outside wall. But every few moments Dregler glanced at Gleer, whose baby like features were so remarkably unchanged: the cupid's bow lips, the cookie-dough cheeks, the tiny gray eyes now almost buried within the flesh of a face too often screwed up with laughter.

A woman with two glasses on a cork-bottomed tray was standing over the table. While Gleer paid for the drinks, Dregler lifted his and held it in the position of a lazy salute. The woman who had brought the drinks looked briefly and without expression at toastmaster Dregler. Then she went away and Dregler, with false ignorance, said: “To your upcoming or recently passed event, whatever it may be or have been.”

“I hope it will be for life this time, thank you, Lucian.”

“What is this, quintus?”

“Quartus, if you don't mind.”

“Of course, my memory is as bad as my powers of observation. Actually I was looking for something shining on your finger, when I should have seen the shine of your eyes. No ring, though, from the bride?”

Gleer reached into the open neck of his shirt and pulled out a length of delicate chainwork, dangling at the end of which was a tiny rose-colored diamond in a plain silver setting.

“Modern innovations,” he said neutrally, replacing the chain and stone. “The moderns must have them, I suppose, but marriage is still marriage.”

“Here's to the Middle Ages,” Dregler said with unashamed weariness.

“And the middle-aged,” refrained Gleer.

The men sat in silence for some moments. Dregler's eyes moved once more around that shadowy loft, where a few tables shared the light of a single lamp. Most of its dim glow backfired onto the wall, revealing the concentric coils of the wood's knotty surface. Taking a calm sip of his drink, Dregler waited.

“Lucian,” Gleer finally began in a voice so quiet that it was nearly inaudible.

“I'm listening,” Dregler assured him.

“I didn't ask you here just to commemorate my marriage. It's been almost a year, you know. Not that that would make any difference to you.”

Dregler said nothing, encouraging Gleer with receptive silence.

“Since that time,” Gleer continued, “my wife and I have both taken leaves from the university and have been traveling, mostly around the Mediterranean. We've just returned a few days ago. Would you like another drink? You went through that one rather quickly.”

“No, thank you. Please go on,” Dregler requested very politely.

After another gulp of brandy, Gleer continued. “Lucian, I've never understood your fascination with what you call the Medusa. I'm not sure I care to, though I've never told you that. But through no deliberate efforts of my own, let me emphasize, I think I can further your, I guess you could say, pursuit. You are still interested in the matter, aren't you?”

“Yes, but I'm too poor to afford Peloponnesian jaunts like the one you and your wife have just returned from. Was that what you had in mind?”

“Not at all. You needn't even leave town, which is the strange part, the real beauty of it. It's very complicated how I know what I know. Wait a second. Here, take this.”

Gleer now produced an object he had earlier stowed away somewhere in the darkness, laying it on the table. Dregler stared at the book. It was bound in a rust-colored cloth and the gold lettering across its spine was flaking away. From what Dregler could make out of the remaining fragments of the letters, the title of the book seemed to be: *Electro-Dynamics for the Beginner*.

“What is this supposed to be?” he asked Gleer.

“Only a kind of passport, meaningless in itself. This is going to sound ridiculous—how I know it!—but you want to bring the book to this establishment,” said Gleer, placing a business card upon the book's front cover, “and ask the owner how much he'll give you for it. I know you go to these shops all the time. Are you familiar with it?”

“Only vaguely,” replied Dregler.

The establishment in question, as the business card read, was Brothers’ Books: Dealers in Rare and Antiquarian Books, Libraries and Collections Purchased, Large Stock of Esoteric Sciences and Civil War, No Appointment Needed, Member of

Manhattan Society of Philosophical Bookdealers, Benjamin Brothers, Founder and Owner.

“I'm told that the proprietor of this place knows you by your writings,” said Gleer, adding in an ambiguous monotone: “He thinks you're a real philosopher.”

Dregler gazed at length at Gleer, his long fingers abstractly fiddling with the little card. “Are you telling me that the Medusa is supposed to be a book?” he said.

Gleer stared down at the table-top and then looked up. “I'm not telling you anything I do not know for certain, which is not a great deal. As far as I know, it could still be anything you can imagine, and perhaps already have. Of course you can take this imperfect information however you like, as I'm sure you will. If you want to know more than I do, then pay a visit to this bookstore.”

“Who told you to tell me this?” Dregler calmly asked.

“It seems better if I don't say anything about that, Lucian. Might spoil the show, so to speak.”

“Very well,” said Dregler, pulling out his wallet and inserting the business card into it. He stood up and began putting on his coat. “Is that all, then? I don't mean to be rude but—”

“Why should you be any different from your usual self? But one more thing I should tell you. Please sit down. Now listen to me. We've known each other a long time, Lucian. And I know how much this means to you. So whatever happens, or doesn't happen, I don't want you to hold me responsible. I've only done what I thought you yourself would want me to do. Well, tell me if I was right.”

Dregler stood up again and tucked the book under his arm. “Yes, I suppose. But I'm sure we'll be seeing each other.

Good night, Joseph."

"One more drink," offered Gleer.

"No, good night," answered Dregler.

As he started away from the table, Dregler, to his embarrassment, nearly rapped his head against a massive wooden beam which hung hazardously low in the darkness. He glanced back to see if Gleer had noticed this clumsy mishap. And after merely a single drink! But Gleer was looking the other way, gazing out the window at the tangled tendrils of the elm and the livid complexion cast upon it by the floodlights fixed high upon the outside wall.

For some time Dregler thoughtlessly observed the windblown trees outside before turning away to stretch out on his bed, which was a few steps from the window of his room. Beside him now was a copy of his first book, *Meditations on the Medusa*. He picked it up and read piecemeal from its pages.

> The worshipants of the Medusa, including those who clog pages with "insights" and interpretations such as these, are the most hideous citizens of this earth—and the most numerous. But how many of them know themselves as such? Conceivably there may be an inner cult of the Medusa, but then again: who could dwell on the existence of such beings for the length of time necessary to round them up for execution?
>
> It is possible that only the dead are not in league with the Medusa. We, on the other hand, are her allies—but always against ourselves. How does one become her companion… and live?

> We are never in danger of beholding the Medusa. For that to happen she needs our consent. But a far greater disaster awaits those who know the Medusa to be gazing at them and long to reciprocate in kind. What better definition of a marked man: one who "has eyes" for the Medusa, whose eyes have a will and a fate of their own.
>
> Ah, to be a thing without eyes. What a break to be born a stone!

Dregler closed the book and then replaced it on one of the shelves across the room. On that, same overcrowded shelf, leather and cloth pressing against cloth and leather, was a fat folder stuffed with loose pages. Dregler brought this back to the bed with him and began rummaging through it. Over the years the file had grown enormously, beginning as a few random memoranda—clippings, photographs, miscellaneous references which Dregler copied out by hand—and expanding into a storehouse of infernal serendipity, a testament of terrible coincidence. And the subject of every entry in this inadvertent encyclopaedia was the Medusa herself.

Some of the documents fell into a section marked "Facetious," including a comic book (which Dregler picked off a drugstore rack) that featured the Medusa as a benevolent superheroine who used her hideous powers only on equally hideous foes in a world without beauty. Others belonged under the heading of "Irrelevant," where was placed a three-inch strip from a decades-old sports page lauding the winning season of "Mr (sic) Medusa." There was also a meager division of the file which had no official designation, but

which Dregler could not help regarding as items of “True Horror.” Prominent among these was a feature article from a British scandal sheet: a photoless chronicle of a man's year-long suspicion that his wife was periodically possessed by the serpent-headed demon, a senseless little guignol which terminated with the wife's decapitation while she lay sleeping one night and the subsequent incarceration of a madman.

One of the least creditable subclasses of the file consisted of pseudo-data taken from the less legitimate propagators of mankind's knowledge: renegade “scientific” journals, occult-anthropology newsletters, and publications of various centers of sundry studies. Contributions to the file from periodicals such as *The Excentaur*, a back issue of which Dregler stumbled across in none other than Brothers’ Books, were collectively categorized as “Medusa and Medusans: Sightings and Material Explanations.” An early number of this publication included an article which attributed the birth of the Medusa, and of all life on Earth, to one of many extraterrestrial visitors, for whom this planet had been a sort of truckstop or comfort station en route to other locales in other galactic systems.

All such enlightening finds Dregler relished with a surly joy, especially those proclamations from the high priests of the human mind and soul, who invariably relegated the Medusa to a psychic underworld where she served as the image par excellence of romantic panic. But unique among the curiosities he cherished was an outburst of prose whose author seemed to follow in Dregler's own footsteps: a man after his own heart. “Can we be delivered,” this writer rhetorically queried, “from the ‘life force’ as symbolized by Me-

dusa? Can this energy, if such a thing exists, be put to death, crushed? Can we, in the arena of our being, come stomping out—gladiator-like—net and trident in hand, and, poking and swooping, pricking and swishing, torment this soulless and hideous demon into an excruciating madness, and, finally, annihilate it to the thumbs-down delight of our nerves and to our soul's deafening applause?" Unfortunately, however, these words were written in the meanest spirit of sarcasm by a critic who parodically reviewed Dregler's own *Meditations on the Medusa* when it first appeared twenty years earlier.

But Dregler never sought out reviews of his books, and the curious thing, the amazing thing, was that this item, like all the other bulletins and ponderings on the Medusa, had merely fallen into his hands unbidden. (In a dentist's office, of all places.) Though he had read widely in the lore of and commentary on the Medusa, none of the material in his rather haphazard file was attained through the normal channels of research. None of it was gained in an official manner, none of it foreseen. In the fewest words, it was all a gift of unforeseen circumstances, strictly unofficial matter.

But what did this prove, exactly, that he continued to be offered these pieces to his puzzle? It proved nothing, exactly or otherwise, and was merely a side-effect of his preoccupation with a single subject. Naturally he would be alert to its intermittent cameos on the stage of daily routine. This was normal. But although these "finds" proved nothing, rationally, they always did suggest more to Dregler's imagination than to his reason, especially when he pored over the collective contents of these archives devoted to his oldest companion.

It was, in fact, a reference to this kind of imagination for which he was now searching as he lay on his bed. And there it was, a paragraph he had once copied in the library from a little yellow book entitled *Things Near and Far*. “There is nothing in the nature of things,” the quotation ran, “to prevent a man from seeing a dragon or a griffin, a gorgon or a unicorn. Nobody as a matter of fact has seen a woman whose hair consisted of snakes, nor a horse from whose forehead a horn projected; though very early man probably did see dragons—known to science as pterodactyls—and monsters more improbable than griffins. At any rate, none of these zoological fancies violates the fundamental laws of the intellect; the monsters of heraldry and mythology do not exist, but there is no reason in the nature of things nor in the laws of the mind why they should not exist.”

It was therefore in line with the nature of things that Dregler suspended all judgements until he could pay a visit to a certain bookstore.

II

It was late the following afternoon, after he emerged from day-long doubts and procrastinations, that Dregler entered a little shop squeezed between a gray building and a brown one. Nearly within arm's reach of each other, the opposing walls of the shop were solid with books. The higher shelves were attainable only by means of a very tall ladder, and the highest shelves were apparently not intended for access. Back numbers of old magazines—*Blackwood's*, *The Spectator*, the *London* and *American Mercurys*—were stacked in plump, orderless piles by the front window, their pulpy covers dying in the sunlight. Missing pages from forgotten nov-

els were stuck forever to a patch of floor or curled up in corners. Dregler noted page two-hundred-and-two of *The Second Staircase* at his feet, and he could not help feeling a sardonic sympathy for the anonymous pair of eyes confronting an unexpected dead end in the narrative of that old mystery. Then again, he wondered, how many thousands of these volumes had already been browsed for the last time. This included, of course, the one he held in his own hand and for which he now succumbed to a brief and absurd sense of protectiveness. Dregler blamed his friend Gleer for this subtle aspect of what he suspected was a farce of far larger and cruder design.

Sitting behind a low counter in the telescopic distance of the rear of the store, a small and flabby man with wire-rimmed eyeglasses was watching him. When Dregler approached the counter and lay the book upon it, the man—Benjamin Brothers—hopped alertly to his feet.

“Help you?” he asked. The bright tone of his voice was the formal and familiar greeting of an old servant.

Dregler nodded, vaguely recognizing the little man from a previous visit to his store some years ago. He adjusted the book on the counter, simply to draw attention to it, and said: “I don't suppose it was worth my trouble to bring this sort of thing here.”

The man smiled politely. “You're correct in that, sir. Old texts like that, worth practically nothing to no one. Now down there in my basement,” he said, gesturing toward a narrow doorway, “I've got literally thousands of things like that. Other things too, you know. The Bookseller's Trade called it ‘Benny's Treasurehouse.’ But maybe you're just interested in selling books today.”

“Well, it seems that as long as I'm here…”

“Help yourself, Dr Dregler,” the man said warmly as Dregler started toward the stairway. Hearing his name, Dregler paused and nodded back at the bookdealer; then he proceeded down the stairs.

Dregler now recalled this basement repository, along with the three lengthy flights of stairs needed to reach its unusual depths. The bookstore at street-level was no more than a messy little closet in comparison to the expansive disorder down below: a cavern of clutter, all heaps and mounds, with bulging tiers of bookshelves laid out according to no easily observable scheme. It was a universe constructed solely of the softly jagged brickwork of books. But if the Medusa was a book, how would he ever find it in this chaos? And if it was not, what other definite form could he expect to encounter of a phenomenon which he had avoided precisely defining all these years, one whose most nearly exact emblem was a hideous woman with a head of serpents?

For some time he merely wandered around the crooked aisles and deep niches of the basement. Every so often he took down some book whose appearance caught his interest, unwedging it from an indistinct mass of battered spines and rescuing it before years rooted to the same spot caused its words to mingle with others among the ceaseless volumes of “Benny's Treasurehouse”, fusing them all into a babble of senseless, unseen pages. Opening the book, he leaned a threadbare shoulder against the towering, filthy stacks. And after spending very little time in the cloistered desolation of that basement, Dregler found himself yawning openly and unconsciously scratching himself, as if he were secluded in some personal sanctum.

But suddenly he became aware of this assumption of privacy which had instilled itself in him, and the feeling instantly perished. Now his sense of a secure isolation was replaced, at all levels of creaturely response, by its opposite. For had he not written that “personal well-being serves solely to excavate within your soul a chasm which waits to be filled by a landslide of dread, an empty mold whose peculiar dimensions will one day manufacture the shape of your unique terror?”

Whether or not it was the case, Dregler felt that he was no longer, or perhaps never was, alone in the chaotic treasure-house. But he continued acting as if he were, omitting only the yawns and the scratchings. Long ago he had discovered that a mild flush of panic was a condition capable of seasoning one's more tedious moments. So he did not immediately attempt to discourage this, probably delusory, sensation. However, like any state dependent upon the play of delicate and unfathomable forces, Dregler's mood or intuition was subject to unexpected metamorphoses.

And when Dregler's mood or intuition passed into a new phase, his surroundings followed close behind: both he and the treasure-house simultaneously crossed the boundary which divides playful panics from those of a more lethal nature. But this is not to say that one kind of apprehension was more excusable than the other; they were equally opposed to the likings of logic. (“Regarding dread, intensity in itself is no assurance of validity.”) So it meant nothing, necessarily, that the twisting aisles of books appeared to be tightening around the suspicious bibliophile, that the shelves now looked more conspicuously swollen with their soft and musty stock, that faint shufflings and shadows

seemed to be frolicking like a fugue through the dust and dimness of the underground treasurehouse. Could he, as he turned the next corner, be led to see that which should not be seen?

The next corner, as it happened, was the kind one is trapped in rather than turns—a cul-de-sac of bookshelves forming three walls which nearly reached the rafters of the ceiling. Dregler found himself facing the rear wall like a bad schoolboy in punishment. He gazed up and down its height as if contemplating whether or not it was real, pondering if one could simply pass through it once one had conquered the illusion of its solidity. Just as he was about to turn and abandon this nook, something lightly brushed against his left shoulder. With involuntary suddenness he pivoted in this direction, only to feel the same airy caress now squarely across his back. Continuing counterclockwise, he executed one full revolution until he was standing and staring at someone who was standing and staring back at him from the exact spot where he, a mere moment before, had been standing.

The woman's high-heeled boots put her face at the same level as his, while her turban-like hat made her appear somewhat taller. It was fastened on the right side, Dregler's left, with a metal clasp studded with watery pink stones. From beneath her hat a few strands of straw-colored hair sprouted onto an unwrinkled forehead. Then a pair of tinted eyeglasses, then a pair of unlipsticked lips, and finally a high-collared coat which descended as a dark, elegant cylinder down to her boots. She calmly withdrew a pad of paper from one of her pockets, tore off the top page, and presented it to Dregler.

“Sorry if I startled you,” it said.

After reading the note, Dregler looked up at the woman and saw that she was gently chopping her hand against her neck, but only a few times and merely to indicate some vocal disability. Laryngitis, wondered Dregler, or something chronic? He examined the note once again and observed the name, address, and telephone number of a company that serviced furnaces and air-conditioners. This, of course, told him nothing.

The woman then tore off a second pre-written message from the pad and pressed it into Dregler's already paper-filled palm, smiling at him very deliberately as she did so. (How he wanted to see what her eyes were doing!) She shook his hand a little before taking away hers and making a silent, scentless exit. So what was that reek Dregler detected in the air when he stared down at the note, which simply read: “Regarding M.”

And below this word-and-a-half message was an address, and below that was a specified time on the following day. The handwriting was nicely formed, the most attractive Dregler had ever seen.

In the light of the past few days, Dregler almost expected to find still another note waiting for him when he returned home. It was folded in half and stuffed underneath the door to his apartment. “Dear Lucian,” it began, “just when you think things have reached their limit of ridiculousness, they become more ridiculous still. In brief—we've been had! Both of us. And by my wife, no less, along with a friend of hers. (A blond-haired anthropology prof whom I think you may know, or know of; at any rate she knows you, or at least your writings, maybe both.) I'll explain the whole thing when we

meet, which I'm afraid won't be until my wife and I get back from another “jaunt”. (Eyeing some more islands, this time in the Pacific.)

“I was thinking that you might be skeptical enough not to go to the bookstore, but after finding you not at home I feared the worst. Hope you didn't have your hopes up, which I don't think has ever happened to you anyway. No harm done, in either case. The girls explained to me that it was a quasi-scientific hoax they were perpetrating, a recondite practical joke. If you think you were taken in, you can't imagine how I was. Unbelievable how real they made the whole ruse seem to me. But if you got as far as the bookstore, you know by now that the punchline to the joke was a pretty weak one. The whole point, as I was told, was merely to stir your interest just enough to get you to perform some mildly ridiculous act. I'm curious to know how Mr B. Bros, reacted when the distinguished author of *Meditations on the Medusa* and other ruminative volumes presented him with a hopelessly worthless old textbook.

“Seriously, I hope it caused you no embarrassment, and both of us, all three of us, apologize for wasting your time. See you soon, tanned and pacified by a South Sea Eden. And we have plans for making the whole thing up to you, that's a promise.”

The note was signed, of course, by Joseph Gleer.

But Gleer's confession, though it was evident to Dregler that he himself believed it, was no more convincing than his “lead” on a Bookstore Medusa. Because this lead, which Dregler had not credited for a moment, led further than Gleer, who no longer credited it, had knowledge of. So it seemed that while his friend had now been placated by a false illu-

mination, Dregler was left to suffer alone the effects of a true state of unknowing. And whoever was behind this hoax, be it a true one or false, knew the minds of both men very well.

Dregler took all the notes he had received that day, paperclipped them together, and put them into a new section of his massive file. He tentatively labelled this section: “Personal Confrontations with the Medusa, Either Real or Apparent.”

III

The address given to Dregler the day before was not too far for him to walk, restive peripatetic that he was. But for some reason he felt rather fatigued that morning, so he hired a taxi to speed him across a drizzle-darkened city. Settling into the spacious dilapidation of the taxi's back seat, he took note of a few things. Why, he wondered, were the driver's glasses, which every so often filled the rear-view mirror, even darker than the day? Did she make a practice of thus “admiring” all her passengers? And was this back-seat debris—the “L”-shaped cigarette butt on the door's armrest, the black apple core on the floor—supposed to serve as objects of his admiration?

Dregler questioned a dozen other things about that routine ride, that drenched day, and the city outside where umbrellas multiplied like mushrooms in the grayness, until he grew satisfied with his lack of a sense of well-being. Earlier he was concerned that his flow of responses that day would not be those of a man who was possibly about to confront the Medusa. He was apprehensive that he might look on this ride and its destination with lively excitement or as

an adventure of some kind; in brief, he feared that his attitude would prove, to a certain extent, to be one of insanity. To be sane, he held, was either to be sedated by melancholy or activated by hysteria, two responses which are "always and equally warranted for those of sound insight." All others were irrational, merely symptoms of imaginations left idle, of memories out of work. And above these mundane responses, the only elevation allowable, the only valid transcendence, was a sardonic one: a bliss that annihilated the visible universe with jeers of dark joy, a mindful ecstasy. Anything else in the way of "mysticism" was a sign of deviation or distraction, and a heresy to the obvious.

The taxi turned onto a block of wetted brownstones, stopping before a tiny streetside lawn overhung by the skeletal branches of two baby birch trees. Dregler paid the driver, who expressed no gratitude whatever for the tip, and walked quickly through the drizzle toward a golden-bricked building with black numbers—two-oh-two—above a black door with a brass knob and knocker. Reviewing the information on the crumpled piece of paper he took from his pocket, Dregler pressed the glowing bell-button. There was no one else in sight along the street, its trees and pavement fragrantly damp.

The door opened and Dregler stepped swiftly inside. A shabbily dressed man of indefinite age closed the door behind him, then asked in a cordially nondescript voice: "Dregler?" The philosopher nodded in reply. After a few reactionless moments the man moved past Dregler, waving once for him to follow down the ground-floor hallway. They stopped at a door that was directly beneath the main stairway leading to the upper floors. "In here," said the man, pla-

cing his hand upon the doorknob. Dregler noticed the ring, its rosewater stone and silver band, and the disjunction between the man's otherwise dour appearance and this comparatively striking piece of jewelry. The man pushed open the door and, without entering the room, flipped a lightswitch on the inside wall.

To all appearances it was an ordinary storeroom cluttered with a variety of objects. “Make yourself comfortable,” the man said as he indicated to Dregler the way into the room. “Leave whenever you like, just close the door behind you.”

Dregler gave a quick look around the room. “Isn't there anything else?” he asked meekly, as if he were the stupidest student of the class. “This is it, then?” he persisted in a quieter, more dignified voice.

“This is it,” the man echoed softly. Then he slowly closed the door, and from inside Dregler could hear footsteps walking back down the hallway.

The room was an average understairs niche, and its ceiling tapered downward into a smooth slant where angular steps ascended upward on the other side. Elsewhere its outline was obscure, confused by bedsheets shaped like lamps or tables or small horses; heaps of rocking chairs and babychairs and other items of disused furniture; bandaged hoses that drooped like dead pythons from hooks on the walls; animal cages whose doors hung open on a single hinge; old paint cans and pale turps speckled like an egg; and a dusty light fixture that cast a gray haze over everything.

Somehow there was not a variety of odors in the room, each telling the tale of its origin, but only a single smell pieced like a puzzle out of many: its complete image was dark as the shadows in a cave and writhing in a dozen direc-

tions over curving walls. Dregler gazed around the room, picked up some small object and immediately set it down again because his hands were trembling. He found himself an old crate to sit on, kept his eyes open, and waited.

Afterward he could not remember how long he had stayed in the room, though he did manage to store up every nuance of the eventless vigil for later use in his voluntary and involuntary dreams. (They were compiled into that increasingly useful section marked “Personal Confrontations with the Medusa,” a section that was fleshing itself out as a zone swirling with red shapes and a hundred hissing voices.) Dregler recalled vividly, however, that he left the room in a state of panic after catching a glimpse of himself in an old mirror that had a hair-line fracture slithering up its center. And on his way out he lost his breath when he felt himself being pulled back into the room. But it was only a loose thread from his overcoat that had gotten caught in the door. It finally snapped cleanly off and he was free to go, his heart livened with dread.

Dregler never let on to his friends what a success that afternoon had been for him, not that he could have explained it to them in any practical way even if he desired to. As promised, they did make up for any inconvenience or embarrassment Dregler might have suffered as a result of, in Gleer's words, the “bookstore incident.” The three of them held a party in Dregler's honor, and he finally met Gleer's new wife and her accomplice in the “hoax.” (It became apparent to Dregler that no one, least of all himself, would admit it had gone further than that.) Dregler was left alone with this woman only briefly, and in the corner of a crowded room. While each of them knew of the other's work, this

seemed to be the first time they had personally met. Nonetheless, they both confessed to a feeling of their prior acquaintance without being able, or willing, to substantiate its origins. And although plenty of mutually known parties were established, they failed to find any direct link between the two of them.

“Maybe you were a student of mine,” Dregler suggested.

She smiled and said: “Thank you, Lucian, but I'm not as young as you seem to think.”

Then she was jostled from behind (“Whoops,” said a tipsy academic), and something she had been fiddling with in her hand ended up in Dregler's drink. It turned the clear bubbling beverage into a glassful of liquid rose-light.

“I'm so sorry. Let me get you another,” she said, and then disappeared into the crowd.

Dregler fished the earring out of the glass and stole away with it before she had a chance to return with a fresh drink. Later in his room he placed it in a small box, which he labelled: “Treasures of the Medusa.”

But there was nothing he could prove, and he knew it.

IV

It was not many years later that Dregler was out on one of his now famous walks around the city. Since the bookstore incident, he had added several new titles to his works, and these had somehow gained him the faithful and fascinated audience of readers that had previously eluded him. Prior to his “discovery” he had been accorded only a distant interest in scholarly and popular circles alike, but now every little habit of his, not least of all his daily meanderings, had been turned by commentators into “typifying traits” and “defin-

ing quirks." "Dregler's walks," stated one article, "are a constitutional of the modern mind, urban journeys by a tortured Ulysses sans Ithaca." Another article offered this back-cover superlative: "the most baroque inheritor of Existentialism's obsessions."

But whatever fatuosities they may have inspired, his recent books—*A Bouquet of Worms*, *Banquet for Spiders*, and *New Meditations on the Medusa*—had enabled him to "grip the minds of a dying generation and pass on to them his pain." These words were written, rather uncharacteristically, by Joseph Gleer in a highly favorable review of *New Meditations* for a philosophical quarterly. He probably thought that this notice would revive his friendship with his old colleague, but Dregler never acknowledged Gleer's effort, nor the repeated invitations to join his wife and him for some get-together or other. What else could Dregler do? Whether Gleer knew it or not, he was now one of them. And so was Dregler, though his saving virtue was an awareness of this disturbing fact. And this was part of his pain.

"We can only live by leaving our 'soul' in the hands of the Medusa," Dregler wrote in *New Meditations*. "Whether she is an angel or a gargoyle is not the point. Each merely allows us a gruesome diversion from some ultimate catastrophe which would turn us to stone; each is a mask hiding the worst visage, a medicine that numbs the mind. And the Medusa will see to it that we are protected, sealing our eyelids closed with the gluey spittle of her snakes, while their bodies elongate and slither past our lips to devour us from the inside. This is what we must never witness, except in the imagination, where it is a charming sight. And in the word, no less than in the mind, the Medusa fascinates much more than

she appalls, and haunts us just this side of petrification. On the other side is the unthinkable, the unheard-of, that-which-should-not-be: hence, the Real. This is what throttles our souls with a hundred fingers—somewhere, perhaps in that dim room which caused us to forget ourselves, that place where we left ourselves behind amid shadows and strange sounds—while our minds and words toy, like playful, stupid pets, with diversions of an immeasurable disaster. The tragedy is that we must steer so close in order to avoid this hazard. We may hide from horror only in the heart of horror."

Now Dregler had reached the outermost point of his daily walk, the point at which he usually turned and made his way back to his apartment, that other room. He gazed at the black door with the brass knob and knocker, then glanced down the street at the row of porchlights and bay windows, which were glowing madly in the late dusk. Looking skyward, he saw the bluish domes of streetlamps: inverted halos or open eyes. A light rain began to sprinkle down, nothing very troublesome. But in the next moment Dregler had already sought shelter in the welcoming brownstone.

He soon came to stand before the door of the room, keeping his hands deep in the pockets of his overcoat and away from temptation. Nothing had changed, he noticed, nothing at all. The door had not been opened by anyone since he had last closed it behind him on that hectic day years ago. And there was the proof, as he knew, somehow, it would be: that long thread from his coat still dangled from where it had been caught between door and frame. Now there was no question about what he would do.

It was to be a quick peek through a hand-wide crack, but enough to risk disillusionment and the dispersal of all the charming traumas he had articulated in his brain and books, scattering them like those peculiar shadows he supposed lingered in that room. And the voices—would he hear that hissing which heralded her presence as much as the flitting red shapes? He kept his eyes fixed upon his hand on the doorknob, turning it gently to nudge open the door. So the first thing he saw was the way it, his hand, took on a rosy dawn-like glow, then a deeper twilight crimson as it was bathed more directly by the odd illumination within the room.

There was no need to reach in and flick the lightswitch just inside. He could see quite enough as his vision, still exceptional, was further aided by the way a certain cracked mirror was positioned, giving his eyes a reflected entrance into the dim depths of the room. And in the depths of the mirror? A split-image, something fractured by a thread-like chasm that oozed up a viscous red glow. There was a man in the mirror; no, not a man but a mannikin, or a frozen figure of some kind. It was naked and rigid, leaning against a wall of clutter, its arms outstretching and reaching behind, as if trying to break a backwards fall. Its head was also thrown back, almost broken-necked; its eyes were pressed shut into a pair of well-sealed creases, two ocular wrinkles which had taken the place of the sockets themselves. And its mouth gaped so widely with a soundless scream that all wrinkles had been smoothed away from that part of the old face.

He barely recognized this face, this naked and paralyzed form which he had all but forgotten, except as a lurid figure of speech he once used to describe the uncanny condition of

his soul. But it was no longer a charming image of the imagination. Reflection had given it charm, made it acceptable to sanity, just as reflection had made those snakes, and the one who wore them, picturesque and not petrifying. But no amount of reflection could have conceived seeing the thing itself, nor the state of being stone.

The serpents were moving now, coiling themselves about the ankles and wrists, the neck; stealthily entering the screaming man's mouth and prying at his eyes. Deep in the mirror opened another pair of eyes the color of wine-mixed water, and through a dark tangled mass they glared. The eyes met his, but not in a mirror. And the mouth was screaming, but made no sound. Finally, he was reunited, in the worst possible way, with the thing within the room.

Stiff inside of stone now, he heard himself think. Where is the world, my words? No longer any world, any words, there would only be that narrow room and its two inseparable occupants. Nothing other than that would exist for him, could exist, nor, in fact, had ever existed. In its own rose-tinted heart, his horror had at last found him.

The Night School (2011 Grimscribe Version)

First published in *Grimscribe*, 1991

Instructor Carniero was holding class once again.

I discovered this fact on my return from a movie theater. It was late and I thought, “Why not take a short cut across the grounds of the school?” This thought led to a whole train of thoughts that I often pondered, especially when I was out walking at night. Mainly these thoughts were about my desire to know something that I was sure was real about my existence, something that could help me in my existence before it was my time to die and be put into the earth to rot, or perhaps have my cremated remains drift out of a chimney stack and sully the sky. Of course, this desire was by no means unique to me. Nonetheless, I had spent quite a few years, my whole life it seemed, seeking to satisfy it in various ways. Most recently, I had sought some kind of satisfaction by attending the classes of Instructor Carniero. Though I had not attended his classes for very long, he seemed to be someone who could reveal what was at the bottom of things. Lost in my thoughts, then, I left the street I was walking along and proceeded across the grounds of the school, which were vast and dark. It was quite cold that night, and when I looked down the front of my overcoat I saw that the single remaining button holding it together had become loose and possibly would not last much longer. So a short cut on my return from that movie theater appeared to be the wise move.

I entered the school grounds as if they were only a great park located in the midst of surrounding streets. The trees were set close and from the perimeter of that parcel of land I could not see the school hidden within them. *Look up here*, I thought I heard someone say to me. When I did look up, I saw that the branches overhead were without leaves, and through their intertwining mesh the sky was fully visible. How bright and dark it was at the same time. *Bright* with a high, full moon shining among the spreading clouds, and *dark* with the shadows mingling within those clouds—a slowly flowing mass of mottled shapes, a kind of unclean outpouring from the black sewers of space.

I noticed that in one place these clouds were leaking down into the trees, trickling in a narrow rivulet across the wall of the night. But it was really smoke, dense and dirty, rising up to the sky. A short distance ahead, and well into the thickly wooded grounds of the school, I saw the spastic flames of a small fire among the trees. By the smell, I guessed that someone was burning refuse. Then I could see the misshapen metal drum spewing smoke, and the figures standing behind the firelight became visible to me, as I was to them.

“Class has resumed,” one of them called out. “He's come back after all.”

I knew these were others from the school, but their faces would not hold steady in the flickering light of the fire that warmed them. They seemed to be smudged by the smoke, greased by the odorous garbage burning in that dark metal drum, its outer surface almost glowing from the heat and flaking off in places.

“Look there,” said another member of the group, pointing deeper into the school grounds. The massive outline of a building occupied the distance, a few of its windows sending a dim light through the trees. From the roof of the building a number of smokestacks stood out against the pale sky.

A wind rose up. It droned noisily around us and breathed a crackling life into the fire in the decayed metal drum. I tried to shout above the confusion of sounds. “Was there an assignment?” I cried out. But they appeared not to hear me, or perhaps were ignoring my words. When I repeated the question they briefly glanced my way, as if I had said something improper. I left them hunched around the fire, assuming they would be along. The wind died, and I could hear someone say the word “maniac,” which was not spoken, I realized, either to me or about me.

Instructor Carniero, in his person, was rather vague to my mind. I had not been in his class very long before some disease—a terribly serious affliction, one of my fellow students hinted—had caused his absence. So what remained, for me, was no more than the image of a slender gentleman in a dark suit, a gentleman with a darkish complexion and a voice thick with a foreign accent. “He's a Portuguese,” someone told me. “But he's lived almost everywhere.” And I recalled a particular phrase of reproof he used to single out those of us who had not been attending to the diagrams he was incessantly creating on the blackboard. “Look up here,” he would say. “If you do not look, you will learn nothing—you will be nothing.” A few members of the class never needed to be called to attention in this manner, a certain small group who had been longtime students of the instructor and without distraction scrutinized the unceasing

series of diagrams he would design upon the blackboard and then erase, only to construct again, with slight variation, a moment later.

Although I cannot claim that these often complex diagrams were not directly related to our studies, there were always extraneous elements within them which I never bothered to transcribe into my own notes for the class. They were a strange array of abstract symbols, frequently geometric figures altered in some way: various polygons with asymmetrical sides, trapezoids whose sides did not meet, semicircles with double or triple slashes across them, and many other examples of a deformed or corrupted scientific notation. These signs appeared to be primitive in essence, more relevant to magic than mathematics. The instructor marked them in an extremely rapid hand upon the blackboard, as if they were the words of his natural language. In most cases they formed a border around a familiar diagram allied to chemistry or physics, enclosing it and sometimes, it seemed, transforming its sense. Once a student questioned him regarding what seemed his apparently superfluous embellishment of these diagrams. Why did Instructor Carniero subject us to these bewildering symbols? "Because," he answered, "a true instructor must share everything, no matter how terrible or lurid it might be."

As I proceeded across the grounds of the school, I noticed certain changes in my surroundings. The trees nearer to the school looked different from those in the encompassing area. These were so much thinner, emaciated and twisted like broken bones that had never healed properly. And their bark seemed to be peeling away in soft layers, because it was not only fallen leaves I trudged through on my way to the

school building, but also something like dark rags, strips of decomposed material. Even the clouds upon which the moon cast its glow were thin or rotted, unraveled by some process of degeneration in the highest atmosphere of the school grounds. There was also a scent of corruption, an enchanting fragrance really—like the mulchy rot of autumn or early spring—that I thought was emerging from the earth as I disturbed the strange litter strewn over it. This odor became more pungent as I approached the yellowish light of the school, and strongest as I finally reached the old building itself.

It was a four-story structure of dark scabby bricks that had been patched together in another era, a time so different that it might be imagined as belonging to an entirely alien history, one composed solely of nights well advanced, an after-hours history. How difficult it was to think of this place as if it had been constructed in the usual manner. Far easier to credit some fantastic legend that it had been erected by a consort of demons during the perpetual night of its past, and that its materials were pilfered from other architectures, all of them defunct: ruined factories, ravaged mausoleums, abandoned orphanages, penitentiaries long out of use. The school was indeed a kind of freakish growth in a dumping ground, a blossom of the cemetery or the cesspool. Here it was that Instructor Carniero, who had been everywhere, held his class.

On the lower floors of the building a number of lights were in use, weak as guttering candles. The highest story was blacked out, and many of the windows were broken. Nevertheless, there was sufficient light to guide me into the school, even if the main hallway could hardly be seen to its

end. And its walls appeared to be tarred over with something which exuded the same smell that filled the night outside the school. Without touching these walls, I used them to navigate my way into the school, following several of the greater and lesser hallways that burrowed throughout the building. Room after room passed on either side of me, their doorways filled with darkness or sealed by wide wooden doors whose coarse surfaces were pocked and peeling. Eventually I found a classroom where a light was on, though it was no brighter than the swarthy illumination of the hallway.

When I entered the room I saw that only some of the lamps were functioning, leaving certain areas in darkness while others were smeared with the kind of greasy glow peculiar to old paintings in oil. A few students were seated at desks here and there, isolated from one another and silent. By no means was there a full class, and no instructor stood at the lectern. The blackboard displayed no new diagrams but only the blurred remnants of past lessons. I took a desk near the door, looking at none of the others as they did not look at me. In one of the pockets of my overcoat I turned up a little stub of a pencil but could find nothing on which to take notes. Without any dramatic gestures, I scanned the room for some kind of paper. The visible areas of the room featured various items of debris without offering anything that would allow me to transcribe the complex instructions and diagrams demanded by the class. I was reluctant to make a physical search of the shelves set into the wall beside me because they were very deep and from them drifted that heady fragrance of decay.

Two rows to my left sat a man with several thick notebooks stacked on his desk. His hands were resting lightly on these notebooks, and his spectacled eyes were fixed on the empty lectern, or perhaps on the blackboard beyond. The space between the rows of desks was very narrow, so I was able to lean across the unoccupied desk that separated us and speak to this man who seemed to have a surplus of paper on which one could take notes, transcribe diagrams, and, in short, do whatever scribbling was demanded by the instructor of the class.

"Pardon me," I whispered to the staring figure. In a single, sudden movement, his head turned to face me. I remembered his pitted complexion, which had obviously grown worse since our class last met, and the eyes that squinted behind heavy lenses. "Do you have any paper you could share with me?" I asked, and was somehow surprised when he shifted his head toward his notebooks and began leafing through the pages of the topmost one. As he performed this action, I explained that I was unprepared for the class, that only a short time before did I learn it had resumed. This happened entirely by chance, I said. I was coming home from a movie theater and decided to take a short cut across the school grounds.

By the time I was finished illuminating my situation, the other student was searching through his last notebook, the pages of which were as solidly covered with jottings and diagrams as the previous ones. I observed that his notes were different from those I had been taking for Instructor Carniero's course. They were far more detailed and scrupulous in their transcriptions of those strange geometric figures which I considered only as decorative intrusions in the in-

structor's diagrams. Some of the other students' notebook pages were wholly given over to rendering these figures and symbols to the exclusion of the diagrams themselves.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I don't seem to have any paper I could share with you."

"Well, could you tell me if there was an assignment?"

"That's very possible. You can never tell with this instructor. He's a Portuguese, you know. But he's been all over and knows everything. I think he's out of his mind. The kind of thing he's been teaching should have gotten him into trouble somewhere, and probably did. Not that he ever cared what happened to him, or to anyone else. That is, those that he could influence, and some more than others. The things he said to *us*. The lessons in measurement of cloacal forces. Time as a flow of sewage. The excrement of space, scatology of creation. The voiding of the self. The whole filthy integration of things and the *nocturnal product*, as he called it, drowning in the pools of night."

"I'm afraid I don't recall those concepts," I confessed.

"You're new to the class. To tell the truth, you don't seem to understand what the instructor is teaching. But soon enough he will get through to you, if he hasn't already. You can never know. He's very captivating, the instructor. And always ready for anything."

"I was told that he recovered from the sickness that caused his absence, and that he was back teaching."

"Oh, he's back. He was always ready. Did you know that the class is now being held in another part of the school? I couldn't tell you where, since even I haven't been with Instructor Carniero as long as some of the others. To tell the

truth, I don't care where it's being held. Isn't it enough that we're here, in this room?”

I had little idea how to answer this question and understood almost nothing of what the man had been trying to explain to me. It did seem clear, or at least very possible, that the class had moved to a different part of the school. But I had no reason to think that the other students seated elsewhere in the room would be any more helpful on this point than the one who had now turned his spectacled face away from me. Wherever the class was being held, I was still in need of paper on which to take notes, transcribe diagrams, and so forth. This could not be accomplished by staying in that room where everyone and everything was degenerating into the surrounding darkness.

For a time I wandered about the hallways on the main floor of the school, keeping clear of the walls which certainly were thickening with a dark substance, an odorous sap with the intoxicating potency of a thousand molting autumns or the melting soil of spring. The stuff was running from top to bottom down the walls, leaking from above and dulling the already dim light in the hallways.

I began to hear echoing voices coming from a distant part of the school I had never visited before. No words were decipherable, but it sounded as if the same ones were being repeated in a more or less constant succession of cries that rang hollow in the halls. I followed them and along the way met up with someone walking slowly from the opposite direction. He was dressed in dirty work clothes and almost blended in with the shadows which were so abundant in the school that night. I stopped him as he was about to shuffle straight past me. Turning an indifferent gaze in my direction

was a pair of yellowish eyes set in a thin face with a coarse, patchy complexion. The man scratched at the left side of his forehead and some dry flakes of skin fell away. I asked him:

"Could you tell me where Instructor Carniero is holding class tonight?"

He looked at me for some moments, and then pointed a finger at the ceiling. "Up there," he said. "Look up there."

"On which floor?"

"The top one," he answered, as if a little amazed at my ignorance.

"There are a lot of rooms on that floor," I said.

"And every one of them is his. Nothing to be done about that. But I have to keep the rest of this place in some kind of condition. I don't see how I can do that with him up there." The man glanced around at the stained walls and let out a single, wheezing laugh. "It only gets worse. Starts to get to you if you go up any further. Listen. Hear the rest of them?" Then he groaned with disgust and went on his way.

But by that point I felt that any knowledge I had amassed —whether or not it concerned Instructor Carniero and his night classes—was being taken away from me piece by piece. The man in dirty work clothes had directed me to the top floor of the school. Yet I remembered seeing no light on that floor when I first approached the building. The only thing that seemed to occupy that floor was an undiluted darkness, a darkness far greater than the night itself, a consolidated darkness, something clotted with its own density. "The *nocturnal product*," I could hear the spectacled student reminding me in a hollow voice. "Drowning in the pools of night."

What could I know about the ways of the school? I had not been in attendance very long, not nearly long enough, it

seemed. I felt myself a stranger to my fellow students, especially since they revealed themselves to be divided in their ranks, as though among the degrees of a secret society. I did not know the coursework in the way some of the others seemed to know it and in the spirit that the instructor intended it to be known. My turn had not yet come to be commanded by Instructor Carniero to look up at the hieroglyphs on the blackboard and comprehend them fully. So I did not understand the doctrines of a truly septic curriculum, the science of a spectral pathology, philosophy of absolute disease, the metaphysics of things sinking into a common disintegration or rising together, flowing together, in their dark rottenness. Above all, I did not know the instructor himself: the places he had been… the things he had seen and done… the experiences he had embraced… the laws he had ignored… the troubles he had caused… the fate that he had incurred, gladly, upon himself and others.

I was now close to a shaft of stairways leading to the upper floors of the school. The voices became louder, though not more distinct, as I approached the stairwell. The first flight of stairs seemed very long and steep, not to mention badly defined in the dim light of the hallway. The landing at the top of the stairs was barely visible for the poor light and unreflecting effluvia that here moved even more thickly down the walls. But it did not appear to possess any real substance, no sticky surface or viscous texture as one might have supposed, only a kind of density like heavy smoke, filthy smoke from some smoldering source of expansive corruption. And it carried the scent of corruption as well as the sight, only now it was more potent with the nostalgic per-

fume of autumn decay or the feculent muskiness of a spring thaw.

I climbed another flight of stairs, which ascended in the opposite direction from the first, and reached the second floor. Each of the four stories of the school had two flights of stairs going in opposite directions between them, with a narrow landing that intervened before one could complete the ascent to a new floor. The second floor was not as well-lighted as the one below, and the walls there were even worse: their surface had been wholly obscured by that smoky blackness which seeped down from above, the blackness so richly odorous with the offal of worlds in decline or perhaps with the dark compost of those about to be born, the primeval impurity in which all things are founded, the native putridity.

On the stairs that led up to the third floor I saw the first of them—a young man who was seated on the lower steps of this flight and who had been one of the instructor's most assiduous students. He was absorbed in his own thoughts and did not acknowledge me until I spoke to him.

"The *class*?" I said, stressing the words into a question.

He gazed at me calmly. "The instructor suffered a terrible disease, a monumental disease." This was all he said. Then he returned within himself and would not respond.

There were others similarly positioned higher on the stairs or squatting on the landing. The voices were still echoing in the stairwell, chanting a blurred phrase in unison. But the voices did not belong to any of these students, who sat silent and entranced amid the scattered pages torn from their voluminous notebooks. Pieces of paper with strange symbols on them lay scattered everywhere like fallen leaves. They

rustled as I walked through them toward the stairs leading to the highest story of the school.

The walls in the stairwell were now swollen with a blackness that was the very face of a plague—pustulant, scabbed, and stinking terribly. It was reaching to the edges of the floor, where it drifted and churned like a black fog. Only in the moonlight that shone through a hallway window could I see anything of the third floor. I stopped there, for the stairs to the fourth were deep in blackness. Only a few faces rose above it and were visible in the moonlight. One of them was staring at me, and, without prompting, spoke.

"The instructor is holding class again despite his terrible disease. Can you imagine? He is able to suffer anything and has been everywhere. Now he is in a new place, somewhere he has not been." The voice paused and the interval was filled by the many voices calling and crying from the total blackness that prevailed over the heights of the stairwell and buried everything beneath it like tightly packed earth in a grave. Then the single voice said: "The instructor died in the night. You see? He is with the night. You hear the voices? They are with him. And he is with the night. The night has spread itself within him. He who has been everywhere may go anywhere with the disease of the night. Listen. The Portuguese is calling to us."

I listened and finally the voices became clear. *Look up here*, they said. *Look up here*.

The fog of blackness had now unfurled down to me and lay about my feet, gathering there and rising. For a time I could not move or speak or form any thoughts. Inside me everything was becoming black. The blackness was quivering in my bones, eating away at them, making everything

black within my body. It was holding me, and the voices were saying, “Look up here, look up here.” And I began to look. But I aborted my gesture before it was completed. I was already too close to something I could not endure, that I was not prepared to endure. Even the blackness quivering inside me could not go on to its end. I could not remain where I was nor look up to the place where the voices called out to me.

Then the blackness seemed to exude from my being, washing itself out of me, and I was no longer inside the school but outside it, almost as if I had suddenly awakened there. Without looking back, I retraced my steps across the grounds of the school, forgetting about the short cut I had meant to take that night. I passed those students who were still standing around the fire burning in an old metal drum. They were feeding the bright flames with pages from their notebooks, pages scribbled to blackness with all those diagrams and freakish signs. Some of those among the group called out to me. “Did you see the Portuguese?” one of them shouted above the noise of the fire and the wind. “Did you hear anything about an assignment?” another voice cried out. And then I heard them all laughing among themselves as I made my way back to the streets I had left before entering the school grounds. I moved with such haste that the loose button on my overcoat finally came off by the time I reached the street outside the grounds of the school.

As I walked beneath the streetlights, I held the front of my overcoat together and tried to keep my eyes on the sidewalk before me. But I might have heard a voice bid me, “Look up here,” because I did look, if only for a moment. Then I saw the sky was clear of all clouds, and the full moon

was shining in the black spaces above. It was shining bright and blurry, as if coated with a luminous mold, floating like a lamp in the great sewers of the night. The *nocturnal product*, I thought, drowning in the pools of night. But these were only words I repeated without understanding. My desire to know something that I was sure was real about my existence, something that could help me in my existence before it was my time to die and be put into the earth to rot, or perhaps have my cremated remains drift out of a chimney stack and sully the sky—that would never be fulfilled. I had learned nothing, and I was nothing. Yet instead of disappointment at my failure to fulfill my most intense desire, I felt a tremendous relief. The urge to know the fundament of things was now emptied from me, and I was more than content to be rid of it. The following night I went to the movie theater again. But I did not take a short cut home.

The Night School (1991 Grimscribe Version)

First published in *Grimscribe*, 1991

Instructor Carniero was holding class once again.

I discovered this fact on my return from a movie theater. It was late and I thought, "Why not take a short cut across the grounds of the school?" How much trouble this alternate route would save me was not precisely clear. Nevertheless, I suddenly felt that if I left the street I was walking along, which was lighted well enough, and proceeded across the grounds of the school, which were vast and dark, I would truly be taking a short cut. Besides, the night was actually quite cold, and when I looked down the front of my overcoat I saw that the single remaining button holding it together had become loose and possibly would not last much longer. So a short cut, taken on a very cold night, appeared entirely in order. In fact, any other course of action seemed unthinkable to me.

I entered the school grounds as if they were only a great park located in the midst of surrounding streets. The trees were set close and from the edge of the grounds I could not see the school hidden within them. *Look up here*, I almost heard someone say to me. I did look and saw that the branches overhead were without leaves; through their intertwining mesh the sky was fully visible. How bright and dark it was at the same time. *Bright* with a high, full moon shining among the spreading clouds, and *dark* with the shadows

mingling within those clouds a slowly flowing mass of mottled shapes, a kind of unclean outpouring from the black sewers of space.

I noticed that in one place these clouds were leaking down into the trees, trickling in a narrow rivulet across the wall of the night. But it was really smoke, dense and dirty, rising up to the sky. A short distance ahead, and well into the thickly wooded grounds of the school, I saw the spastic flames of a small fire among the trees. By the smell, I guessed that someone was burning refuse. Then I could see the misshapen metal drum spewing smoke, and the figures standing behind the firelight became visible to me, as I was to them.

“Class has resumed,” one of them called out. “He's come back after all.”

I knew these were others from the school, but their faces would not hold steady in the flickering light of the fire that warmed them. They seemed to be smudged by the smoke, greased by the odorous garbage burning in that dark metal drum, its outer surface almost glowing from the heat and flaking off in places.

“Look there,” said another member of the group, pointing deeper into the school grounds. The massive outline of a building occupied the distance, a few of its windows sending a dim light through the trees. From the roof of the building a number of smokestacks stood out against the pale sky.

A wind rose up, droning loudly around us and breathing a noisy life into the fire in the decaying metal drum. I tried to shout above the confusion of sounds. “Was there an assignment?” I cried out. When I repeated the question, they only seemed to shrug. I left them hunched around the fire,

assuming they would be along. The wind died and I could hear someone say the word “maniac,” which was not spoken, I realized, either to me or about me.

Instructor Carniero, in his person, was rather vague to my mind. I had not been in the class very long before some disease a terribly serious affliction, one of my classmates hinted-had caused his absence. So what remained, for me, was no more than the image of a slender gentleman in a dark suit, a gentleman with a darkish complexion and a voice thick with a foreign accent. “He's a Portuguese,” one of the other students told me. “But he's lived almost everywhere.” And I recalled a particular refrain spoken by that soft and heavy voice. “Look up here,” he would say, usually singling out one of us who had not been attending to those diagrams he was incessantly creating on the blackboard. A few ” members of the class never needed to be called to attention in this manner, a certain small group who had been longtime students of the instructor and without distraction scrutinized the unceasing series of diagrams he would design upon the blackboard and then erase, only to construct again, with slight variation, a moment later.

Although I cannot claim that these often complex diagrams were not directly related to our studies, there were always extraneous elements within them which I never bothered to transcribe into my own notes for the class. They were a strange array of abstract symbols, frequently geometric figures altered in some way: various polygons with asymmetrical sides, trapezoids whose sides did not meet, semicircles with double or triple slashes across them, and many other examples of a deformed or corrupted scientific notation. These signs appeared to be primitive in essence, more

relevant to magic than mathematics. The instructor marked them in an extremely rapid hand upon the blackboard, as if they were the words of his natural language. In most cases they formed a border around the perimeter of a strictly technical diagram, enclosing it and sometimes, it seemed, transforming its sense. Once a student actually questioned him regarding this apparently superfluous embellishment of the diagrams. Why did Instructor Carniero subject us to these bewildering symbols? "Because," he answered, "a true instructor must share everything."

As I proceeded across the grounds of the school, I felt certain changes had occurred since I was last there. The trees looked different somehow, even in the faint moonlight which shone through their bare branches. They had become so much thinner than I remembered, emaciated and twisted like broken bones that had never healed properly. Their bark seemed to be peeling away in soft layers, because it was not only fallen leaves I trudged through on my way to the school building, but also something like dark rags, strips of decomposed material. Even the clouds upon which the moon cast its glow were thin or rotted, unravelled by some process of degeneration in the highest atmosphere of the school grounds. There was also a scent of corruption, an enchanting fragrance really—like the mulchy rot of autumn or early spring—that I thought was emerging from the earth as I disturbed the strange debris strewn over it. But I noticed that this odor became more pungent as I approached the yellowish light of the school, and strongest as I finally reached the old building itself.

It was a four-story structure of dark scabby bricks that had been patched together in another era, a time so different

that it might be imagined as belonging to an entirely alien history, one composed solely of nights well advanced, an after-hours history. How difficult it was to think of this place as if it had been constructed in the usual manner. Far easier to credit some fantastic legend that it had been erected by a consort of demons during the perpetual night of its past, and that its materials were absconded from other architectures, all of them defunct: ruined factories, crumbling prisons, abandoned orphanages, mausoleums long out of use. The school was indeed a kind of freakish growth in a dumping ground, a blossom of the cemetery or the cesspool. Here it was that Instructor Carniero, who had been everywhere, held his class.

On the lower floors of the building a number of lights were in use, weak as guttering candles. The highest story was blacked out, and I noticed that many of the windows were broken. Nevertheless, there was sufficient light to guide me into the school, even if the main hallway could hardly be seen to its end. And its walls appeared to be tarred over with something which exuded the same smell that filled the night outside the school. Without touching these walls, I used them to navigate my way into the school, following several of the greater and lesser hallways that burrowed throughout the building. Room after room passed on either side of me, their doorways filled with darkness or sealed by wide wooden doors whose coarse surfaces were pocked and peeling. Eventually I found a classroom where a light was on, though it was no brighter than the swarthy illumination of the hallway.

When I entered the room I saw that only some of the lamps were functioning, leaving certain areas in darkness

while others were smeared with the kind of greasy glow peculiar to old paintings in oil. A few students were seated at desks here and there, isolated from one another and silent. By no means was there a full class, and no instructor stood at the lectern. The blackboard displayed no new diagrams but only the blurred remnants of past lessons.

I took a desk near the door, looking at none of the others as they did not look at me. In one of the pockets of my overcoat I turned up a little stub of a pencil but could find nothing on which to take notes. Without any dramatic gestures, I scanned the room for some kind of paper. The visible areas of the room featured various items of debris without offering anything that would allow me to transcribe the complex instructions and diagrams demanded by the class. I was reluctant to make a physical search of the shelves set into the wall beside me because they were very deep and from them drifted that same heady fragrance of decay.

Two rows to my left sat a man with several thick notebooks stacked on his desk. His hands were resting lightly on these notebooks, and his spectacled eyes were fixed on the empty lectern, or perhaps on the blackboard beyond. The space between the rows of desks was very narrow, so I was able to lean across the unoccupied desk that separated us and speak to this man who seemed to have a surplus of paper on which one could take notes, transcribe diagrams, and, in short, do whatever scribbling was demanded by the instructor of the class.

"Pardon me," I whispered to the staring figure. In a single, sudden movement, his head turned to face me. I remembered his pocked complexion, which had obviously grown worse since our class last met, and the eyes that

squinted behind heavy lenses. “Do you have any paper you could share with me?” I asked, and was somehow surprised when he shifted his head toward his notebooks and began leafing through the pages of the topmost one. As he performed this action, I explained that I was unprepared for the class, that only a short time before did I learn it had resumed. This happened entirely by chance. I was coming home from a movie theater and decided to take a short cut across the school grounds.

By the time I was finished illuminating my situation, the other student was searching through his last notebook, the pages of which were as solidly covered with jottings and diagrams as the previous ones. I observed that his notes were different from those I had been taking for Instructor Carniero's course. They were far more detailed and scrupulous in their transcriptions of those strange geometric figures which I considered only as decorative intrusions in the instructor's diagrams. Some of the other students’ notebook pages were wholly given over to rendering these figures and symbols to the exclusion of the diagrams themselves.

“I'm sorry,” he said. “I don't seem to have any paper I could share with you.”

“Well, could you tell me if there was an assignment?”

“That's very possible. You can never tell with this instructor. He a Portuguese, you know. But he's been all over and knows everything. I think he's out of his mind. The kind of thing he's been teaching should have gotten him into trouble somewhere, and probably did. Not that he ever cared what happened to him, or to anyone else. That is; those that he could influence, and some more than others. The things he said to us. The lessons in measurement of cloacal forces.

Time as a flow of sewage. The excrement of space, scatology of creation. The voiding of the self. The whole filthy integration of things and the nocturnal product, as he called it. Drowning in the pools of night…"

"I'm afraid I don't recall those concepts," I interrupted. "You were new to the class. To tell the truth, it didn't seem you were paying attention. But soon enough he would have gotten through to you. Told you to look up there," he said, pointing to the blackboard. "You remember that much, don't you? He was very captivating, the instructor. And always ready for anything."

"I thought that he recovered from the sickness that caused his absence, that he was back teaching."

"Oh, he's back. He was always ready. But somewhere he must have made some enemies. Did you know that the class is now being held in another part of the school? I couldn't tell you where, since I haven't been with Instructor Carniero as long as some of the others. To tell the truth,

I don't care where it's being held. Isn't it enough that we're here, in this room?"

I had little idea how to answer this question and understood almost nothing of what the man had been trying to explain to me. It did seem clear, or at least very possible, that the class had moved to a different part of the school. But I had no reason to think that the other students seated elsewhere in the room would be any more helpful on this point than the one who had now turned his spectacled face away from me. Wherever the class was being held, I was still in need of paper on which to take notes, transcribe diagrams, and so forth. This could not be accomplished by staying in

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"Could you tell me where Instructor Carniero is holding class tonight?"

He looked at me for some moments, and then pointed a finger at the ceiling. "Up there," he said.

"On which floor?"

"The top one," he answered, as if a little amazed at my ignorance.

"There are a lot of rooms on that floor," I said.

“And every one of them his. Nothing to be done about that. But I have to keep the rest of this place in some kind condition. I don't see how I can do that with him up there.” The man glanced around at the stained walls and let out a single, wheezing laugh. “It only gets worse. Starts to get to you if you go up any further. Listen. Hear the rest of them?” Then he groaned with disgust and went on his way. But before he was entirely out of view he looked over his shoulder and shouted to me. “There's another one you might see. A new one. Just so you'll know.”

But by that point I felt that any knowledge I had amassed-whether or not it concerned Instructor Carniero and his night classes was being taken away from me piece by piece. The man in dirty workclothes had directed me to the top floor of the school. Yet I remembered seeing no light on that floor when I first approached the building. The only thing that seemed to occupy that floor was an undiluted darkness, a darkness far greater than the night itself, a consolidated darkness, something clotted with its own density. “The nocturnal product,” I could hear the spectacled student reminding me in a hollow voice. “Drowning in the pools of night.”

What could I know about the ways of the school? I had not been in attendance very long, not nearly long enough, it seemed. I felt myself a stranger to my fellow students, especially since they revealed themselves to be divided in their ranks, as though among the initiatory degrees of a secret society. I did not know the coursework in the way some of the others seemed to know it and in the spirit that the instructor intended it to be known. My turn had not yet come to be commanded by Instructor Carniero to look up at the hieroglyphs of the blackboard and comprehend them fully. So I

did not understand the doctrines of a truly septic curriculum, the science of a spectral pathology, philosophy of absolute disease, the metaphysics of things sinking into a common disintegration or rising together, flowing together, in their dark rottenness. Above all, I did not know the instructor himself: the places he had been... the things he had seen and done... the experiences he had embraced... the laws he had ignored... the troubles he had caused... the enemies he had made... the fate that he had incurred, gladly, upon himself and others. And of course I could not know anything of that "new one" about whom the man in the dirty workclothes had warned me, the one who may have also been an instructor, after a fashion-the instructor's instructor... and his accomodating enemy.

I was close to a shaft of stairways leading to the upper floors of the school. The voices became louder, though not more distinct, as I approached the stairwell. The first flight of stairs seemed very long and steep and badly defined in the dim light of the hallway. The landing at the top of the stairs was barely visible for the poor light and unreflecting effluvia that here moved even more thickly down the walls. But it did not appear to possess any real substance, no sticky surface or viscous texture as one might have supposed, only a kind of density like heavy smoke, filthy smoke from some smoldering source of expansive corruption. It carried the scent of corruption as well as the sight, only now it was more potent with the nostalgic perfume of autumn decay or the feculent muskiness of a spring thaw.

As I reached the first landing of the stairway, I nearly overlooked the figure standing motionless in a comer. This was certainly the newcomer to the school whose presence

had been foretold to me. He was almost naked and his skin was of a darkness, an excremental darkness, that made him blend into the obscurity of the stairwell. His face was leathery and deeply lined, incredibly old, while the hair surrounding it was stringy and had been hung with objects that looked like tiny bones and teeth. They were tied up within long strands of hair and jangled in the darkness. Around the neck of this figure was a rope or thin strap which was strung with little skulls, dismembered claws, and whole withered bodies of creatures I could not name. Although I stood for some moments quite near to the ancient savage, he took no notice of me. His large, fierce eyes stared upwards, fixed upon the heights of the stairwell. His thin peeling lips were alive with a silent language, mouthing words without sound. But I could not read his speech and so turned away from him.

I climbed another flight of stairs, which ascended in the opposite direction from the first, and reached the second floor. Each of the four stories of the school had two flights of stairs going in opposite directions between them, with a narrow landing that intervened before one could complete the ascent to a new floor. The second floor was not as well-lighted as the one below, and the walls there were even worse: their surface had been wholly obscured by that smoky blackness which seeped down from above, the blackness so richly odorous with the offal of worlds in decline or perhaps with the dark compost of those about to be born, the great rottenness in which all things are founded, the fundament of wild disease.

On the stairs that led up to the third floor I saw the first of them a young man who was seated on the lower steps of

this flight and who had been one of the instructor's most assiduous students: He was absorbed in his own thoughts and did not acknowledge me until I spoke to him.

"The class?" I said, stressing the words into a question. He gazed at me calmly. "The instructor suffered a terrible disease, a great disease." This was all he said. Then he returned within himself and would not respond.

There were others, similarly positioned higher on the stairs or squatting on the landing. The voices were still echoing in the stairwell, chanting a blurred phrase in unison. But the voices did not belong to any of these students, who sat silent and entranced amid the litter of pages tom from their voluminous notebooks. Pieces of paper with strange symbols on them lay scattered everywhere like fallen leaves. They rustled as I walked through them toward the stairs leading to the highest story of the school.

The walls in the stairwell were now swollen with a blackness that was the very face of a plague pustulant, scabbed, and stinking terribly. It was reaching to the edges of the floor, where it drifted and churned like a black fog. Only in the moonlight that shone through a hallway window could I see anything of the third floor. I stopped there, for the stairs to the fourth were deep in blackness. Only a few faces rose above it and were visible in the moonlight. One of them was staring at me, and, without prompting, spoke.

"The instructor suffered a terrible disease. But he is holding class again. He could suffer anything and did not shun enemies. He had been everywhere. Now he is in a new place, somewhere he has not been." The voice paused and the interval was filled by the many voices calling and crying from the total blackness that prevailed over the heights of the

stairwell and buried everything beneath it like tightly packed earth in a grave. Then the single voice said: “The instructor died in the night. You see? He is with the night. You hear the voices? They are with him. All of them are with him and he is with the night. The night has spread itself within him, the disease of the night has spread its blackness. He who has been everywhere may go anywhere with the spreading disease of the night. Listen. The Portuguese is calling to us.”

I listened and finally the voices became clear. Look up here, they said. Look up here.

The fog of blackness had now unfurled down to me and lay about my feet, gathering there and rising. For a time

I could not move or speak or form any thoughts. Inside me, everything was becoming black. The blackness was quivering inside me, quivering everywhere and making everything black. It was holding me, and the voices were saying to me, “Look up here, look up here.” And I began to look. But I was enduring something that I could never endure, that I was not prepared to endure. The blackness quivering inside me could not go on to its end. I could not remain where I was or look up to the place where the voices called out to me.

Then the blackness was no longer inside me, and I was no longer inside the school but outside of it, almost as if I had suddenly awakened there. Without looking back, I retraced my steps across the grounds of the school, forgetting about the short cut I had meant to take that night. I passed those students who were still standing around the fire burning in an old metal drum. They were feeding the bright flames with pages from their notebooks, pages scribbled to blackness

with all those diagrams and freakish signs. Some of those among the group called out to me. “Did you see the Portuguese?” one of them shouted above the noise of the fire and the wind. “Did you hear anything about an assignment?” another voice cried out, and then I heard them all laughing among themselves as I made my way back to the streets I had left before entering the school grounds. I moved with such haste that the loose button on my overcoat finally came off by the time I reached the street outside the grounds of the school.

As I walked beneath the streetlights, I held the front of my overcoat together and tried to keep my eyes on the sidewalk before me. But I might have heard a voice bid me: “Look up here,” because I did look, if only for a moment. Then I saw the sky was clear of all clouds, and the full moon was shining in the black pool of space. It was shining bright and blurry, as if coated with a luminous mold, floating like a lamp in the great sewers of the night.

The Dark Beauty Of Unheard-of Horrors (2003 The Thomas Ligotti Reader Version)

Originally appeared in Tekeli-li! #4, 1992.

It is not necessary, perhaps not even possible, for a story to mean just what it says. Beneath the surface utterances of setting, incident, and character, there is another voice that may speak of something more than the bare elements of narrative. The things this other voice has to express must be interpreted for the mind through the strictly conspicuous aspects of the story, though such interpretations are often wildly various. (Religious parables offer the most obvious example of this chaotic phenomenon.) In greater accord, one hopes, are the emotions experienced in the course of reading, since emotion, not mind, is the faculty for hearing the secret voice of the story and apprehending its meaning. Without emotion, neither story nor anything else can convey meaning as such, only data. This, not entirely original, argument goes double, if not more, for stories of the supernatural.

More than many other types of stories, it is crucial that those of the supernatural make their statement of meaning as much as possible by means of emotion, especially the present advanced stage in the development of this literary genre. Years of exegesis have made interpreting supernatural

tales into a game that anyone can play, and one finds that gods and demons are quite easily relocated from the dreams in which they were born into some mundane context of sociology, psychology, politics, or whatever. The result is pathetic and, in the worst sense of the word, grotesque. One of the noblest and most tragic figures of the imagination was the vampire—damn his soul, and our own. But to see this marvelous, terrifying creature reduced to a plastic Halloween mask for sexual or political repression has been a tedious outrage. The vampire attained his stature through the emotion of fear of a fantastic evil, yet how utterly he has lost it all at the heavy, hammering hands of explication. Rest in peace, Nosferatu, none will ever take your place.

If the vampire no longer raises the emotion he once did, perhaps it is partly his own fault. He lost his mystery because he had so little of it to start. His nature and habits were always documented in detail, his ways and means a matter of public record. Too many laws lorded over him, and all laws belong to the natural world. Like his colleague the werewolf, he was too much a known quantity. His was a familiar, most of the time human body, and it was used like a whore by writers whose concerns were predominantly for the body as well as the everyday path in which it walks. Consequently, the vampire was stripped of all that made him alien to our ordinary selves, until he was transformed into merely the bad boy next door. He remained a menace, to be sure, but his focus shifted from the soul to the senses. This is how it is when a mysterious force is embodied in a human body, or in any form that is too well fixed. And a mystery explained is one robbed of its power of emotion, dwindling

into a parcel of information, a tissue of rules and statistics without meaning in themselves.

Of course, mystery actually requires a measure of the concrete if it is to be perceived at all; otherwise is only a void, the void. The thinnest mixture of this mortar, I suppose, is contained in that most basic source of mystery—darkness. Very difficult to domesticate this phenomenon, to collar it and give a name to the fear it inspires. As a verse writer once said:

The blackness at the bottom of a well
May hold most any kind of hell

The dark, indeed, phenomenon possessing the maximum of mystery, the one most resistant to the taming of the mind and most resonant with emotions and meanings of a highly complex and subtle type. It is also extremely abstract as a provenance for supernatural horror, an elusive prodigy whose potential for fear may slip through a writer's fingers and right past even a sensitive reader of terror tales. Obviously it is problematic in a way that a solid pair of gleaming fangs at a victim's neck is not. Hence, darkness itself is rarely used in a story as the central incarnation of the supernatural, though it often serves in a supporting role as an element of atmosphere, an extension of more concrete phenomena. The shadowy ambiance of a fictional locale almost always resolves itself into an apparition of substance, a threat with a name, if not a full blown history. Darkness may also perform in a strictly symbolic capacity, representing the abyss at the core of any genuine tale of mystery and horror. But to draw a reader's attention to this abyss, this unnameable hell of blackness, is usually sacrificed in favor of focus-

ing on some tangible dread pressing against the body of everyday life. From these facts may be derived an ad hoc taxonomy for dividing supernatural stories into types, or rather a spectrum of types: on the one side, those that tend to emphasize the surface manifestations of a supernatural phenomenon; on the other, those that reach toward the dark core of mystery in purest and most abstract condition. The former stories show us the bodies, big as life, of the demonic tribe of spooks, vampires, and other assorted bogeymen; the latter suggest to us the essence, far bigger than life, of that dark universal terror beyond naming which is the matrix for all other terrors. Prominent among the lastnamed tales is H.P. Lovecraft's ‘The Music of Erich Zann.’

II

The most radical form of the unknown, and the least adulterated avatar of mystery, darkness is all-pervasive in ‘The Music of Erich Zann.’ In addition to functioning as a natural atmospheric element in the tale, it is ultimately revealed as the primary supernatural phenomenon. The story reaches its pitch of uncanny revelation when the narrator witnesses ‘the blackness of space illimitable’ in place of the reassuring city lights he expected to see through the window of Erich Zann's garrett room. There are only two things we can know about this mysterious blackness: first, that in some indefinable way it is both menacing and alluring (a usual, perhaps necessary conjunction in horror tales); second, that it has an important, and once indefinable, connection with Erich Zann and the strange music he plays on a viol. Zann is portrayed as a musician of genius, yet he performs with a ‘cheap theatre orchestra’ and resides in a freak-

ishly dilapidated boarding house in the, also freakishly dilapidated, Rue d'auseil. He himself is described as being physically and psychically deformed in such a way that identifies him with the Rue d'auseil and its crooked, leaning houses. This is his realm, which may be prison or paradise or both, and with his death at the end of the story it disappears from this earth, if it ever was in fact on it. Indeed, neither Zann nor the street was ever part of material reality, for Zann's world 'lay in some far cosmos of the imagination.' It is to this world that the narrator is unaccountably drawn at the beginning of the story and which he also seeks to recover after he flees the 'marvels and terrors' introduced to him by the bizarre German musician.

Just as there exists an intimate correspondence between Zann and the Rue d'auseil, and between Zann's music and the blackness beyond the wall the summit of that unreal street, there is also an identification between Zann and the narrator. Both of them are victims of 'physical and nervous suffering.' More significantly, they are each in thrall to the 'dread of vague wonder and brooding mystery' of an unearthly music and by extension to the dark doom that this music seems both to conjure and to keep at bay. Earlier in the story, the narrator makes an effort to whistle some of the 'weird notes' he has heard Zann playing in his crummy garrett room, an act that seems to stir up certain forces beyond the room's window; later, Zann plays these same notes as if they had some power against the advancing blackness. Perhaps that power is one of both invocation and exorcism allowing Zann to play with another power, namely that of a supernatural musicmaker who produces 'shriller, steadier note' than Zann's, 'a calm, deliberate, *purposeful*, *mocking*

note from far away in the West.' (Italics mine: apparently at the time this story was written, 1921, Lovecraft did not yet perceive the alien forces of the universe as 'indifferent,' nor had he begun to anthropomorphize them; that culminated in the Old Ones of 'At the Mountains of Madness,' who are called 'men' for all their superficial strangeness.) What led Zann into this terrible duet with the dark is unknown, though his perpetuation of this relationship is characterized as something of a vice by the narrator, who observes the performing Zann 'dripping with perspiration and twisted like a monkey' and who impressionistically symbolizes Zann's music with visions of 'shadowy satyrs and Bacchanals dancing and whirling insanely and through seething abysses of clouds and smoke and lightning.'

Certainly Zann is aware of the temptations of his music, and does his best—or does he?—to quell the curiosity it has aroused in the narrator. But the exact nature of Zann's obsession is left in darkness—the 'notes' the Old German composes in explanation of himself, unlike Alhazred's *Necronomicon*, would have been far too unearthly and alien to simple human feeling to survive even in fragments; hence, they are wisely lost to the world. What brought this man 'who signed his name as Erich Zann'—as if he had another name, or perhaps none—to that rundown boarding house in the Rue d'auseil? What caused him to remain on that twisted street? Above all, what is it about the blackness and its 'shocking music' that so possesses him? (Of course, the identical questions might be asked concerning the narrator, who is in a position to inform us of the answers but, for obscure reasons unable to.) Interestingly lucid is the fact that the supernatural aspect of the story—that reverberant black-

ness which threatens to overwhelm the city beyond Zann's window and possibly the entire world—is exclusive to Zann, and, by some occult transference or predisposition, the narrator. After the narrator flees the Rue d'auseil, he finds that the rest of the city has been unaffected by the fantastic cataclysm that occurred in his old neighborhood. But, as previously established, Zann and the Rue d'auseil were, at the very least, sympathetic entities, a district unto themselves—and when he disappeared into the blackness he seems to have taken the street, which was as old and misshapen as he, along with him.

In the blackness is the secret core of the primary super natural phenomenon of the story, whereas Zann's music may be viewed as an ancillary phenomenon, a more credible and tangible quality that allows one to grasp, however tenuously, the utterly mysterious. And in the blackness the mystery must remain, nameless and unknown, leaving only the memory of a certain haunting music to suggest, as subtly as possible, its meaning. It is the abstract, elusive form of supernatural horror in this story that may account for its enduring enchantment for certain readers. *The Music of Erich Zann* was Lovecraft's early, almost premature expression of his ideal as a writer: the use of maximum suggestion and minimal explanation to evoke a sense of supernatural terrors and wonders. It is also among those of his stories that bear the greatest resemblance to the masterpieces Lovecraft most admired and held as touchstones for excellence in the realm of the weird: Blackwood's ‘The Willows’, Machen's ‘The White People’, Poe's ‘Fall of the House of Usher.’ Like those tales, *The Music of Erich Zann* ultimately withholds its secrets and preserves its mystery; narrative gives a peculiar

shape to perennial enigmas, creating a new landscape at the center of which is the same ancient abyss (and outside of which is the void). Later, in 'The Colour out of Space,' Lovecraft fashioned a visual counterpart to the aural mysteries of *The Music of Erich Zann*, a pernicious and inexplicable entity that arrives from the black well of the cosmos to blacken the life of our earth. No surprise that Lovecraft conjoined these two tales as his best, setting them apart from those of the famous Cthulhu Mythos which, by contrast, seem to fall into the category of 'explained' supernatural fiction after the manner of Ann Radcliffe. In the earlier story as much as the later one, that secret voice beneath the narrative speaks strongly and stridently, imparting its meaning through feelings rather than facts, singing a song without words on the theme of the nameless horror and strangeness of the universe, that cosmic neighborhood where everything that is, is terrifyingly wrong... and at the same time alluring, a place of charming evil.

The Music of Erich Zann seems to say: stay away from the Rue d'auseil. In actuality, however, it invites us to make our home there, haunts us, as the narrator of the story is haunted, and inspires us to find again something that was lost, to seek out that blackness and play to it at our peril... without ever knowing why. This is a familiar experience for those 'sensitive few' whose responses form the foundation of Lovecraft's aesthetic of supernatural horror. Illuminating this ordeal which is indulged in for its own sake by aesthetes of the unknown, Jorge Luis Borges has written: 'Music, states of happiness, mythology, faces molded by time, certain twilights and certain places—all these are trying to tell

us something; that imminence of a revelation that is not yet produced is, perhaps, the aesthetic reality.'

The above quotation cannot fail to remind us of so many statements made by Lovecraft concerning those sensations which, as he asserted, alone made his existence endurable. Among such declarations is the following: 'Sometimes I stumble accidentally on rare combinations of slope, curved streetline, roofs and gables and chimneys, and accessory details of verdure and background, which in the magic of late afternoon assume a mystic majesty and exotic significance beyond the power of words to describe... All that to capture some fragment of this hidden and unreachable beauty; this beauty which is all of dream, yet which I have known closely and reveled in through long aeons before my birth or the birth of this or of any other world."

In *The Music of Erich Zann*, Lovecraft captured at least a fragment of the desired object and delivered it to his readers. Like Erich Zann's 'world of beauty', Lovecraft's 'lay in some far cosmos of the imagination', and like that of another artist, it is a 'beauty that hath horror in it'.

The Mocking Mystery (2011 Noctuary Version)

First published in *Noctuary*, 1994.

Where ultimate knowledge is denied, mystery must rule. Every enterprise is instigated by it; every world is founded upon it. Above all does it live in the ruins of certain cities where everything has been denied and even the shadows suffocate in the dense ether of mystery.

A type of worship may even be devoted to the ruined state, consecrating earthly objects that in their decrepitude have attained a divine status. Crumbling pillars shake off their burden, forsake their function, and stand serenely above the rubble of old impediments. And what domes and spires may still be held aloft release their grasp upon the gray heights of a barren horizon. Below, carven images of gods and beasts all abandon themselves to shattered confusion, their once perfect likenesses now heaped and corroded, their significance lost. Skeletons eased of all flesh openly consort with stones and dust, liberated from the duties of life.

Indeed, the ideal of the necropolis appears to be annihilation. Everywhere things are effacing or disguising their existence, seeking a mask of shadows or a veil of pale light wavering across their disfigured surfaces. But their struggle for obscurity nonetheless remains only a matter of form—an invasion of vitality still threatens the ruins of certain cities.

And though it may arrive in different guises, the outcome will be the same: a new genesis.

Preceding revivification there may be a sudden darkness which embraces the dead city, and within the darkness great flashes of light create the appearance that things are in motion. There may only be a frail mist which drifts among the ruins and slithers into their every fracture. Or there may be nothing at all, or nothing that may be witnessed. Yet all the same it will happen that something begins to stir where, for so long, everything had been at rest. Then it will seem that skeletons have broken the silence with moans of life and the stones themselves have emerged from sleep. And other things join in the awakening, as old dreams sink into the ocean of unmemory and the ruins are recreated in a new semblance.

The source of this resurrection-to-come may remain unknown, its purposes secreted in the remotest parts of the creation. Yet no force ever withstands the way of this mysterious maker of new worlds, just as no world is ever allowed to endure in its greatness. For nothing is allowed a face but that it may be only a mask without a constant soul; nothing is allowed a mask but that it may wither and finally be torn from its face. And upon these truths will all things thrive in the great chains of that strange and endless dream, and flourish—let it be said—in the mysterious atmosphere of ruination.

For wherever mystery serves as a foundation, only ruins may be erected. There, every structure is secretly ravaged as it rises, for beneath lie the wavering substrata and a strange life that will not share itself with any other. Yet more strangely, neither will it long tolerate the dignity of a pictur-

esque decay, and thus is forever creeping into the desolate ruins of certain cities to violate their sleep. Then will the wreckage be resurrected in new shapes, the scenery pulled up on another stage, lively faces painted upon dead players, their twisted limbs restrung with wires.

But mystery itself remains guarded, its life sealed far away from its creation. And in a world that seems to possess a life of its own, figures parade in a state of terror which is immortal, unchanging, and which endures, through all the phases of a fateful ordeal, as their only inviolable birthright.

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The Tsalal
(2011 Noctuary Version)

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1

Moxton's Leave-taking

None of them could say how it was they had returned to the skeleton town. Some had reached the central cross streets, where a single traffic light, long dead, hung down like a dark lantern. There they paused and stood dumbstruck, scarecrows positioned out of place, their clothes lying loose and worn about scrawny bodies. Others slowly joined them, drifting in from the outskirts or disembarking from vehicles weighted down with transportable possessions. Then all of them gathered silently together on that vast, gray afternoon.

They seemed too exhausted to speak and for some time appeared not to recognize their location among the surrounding forms and spaces. Their eyes were fixed with an insomniac's stare, divulging both monumental fatigue and painful attentiveness to everything in sight. Their faces were narrow and ashen, a few specks mingling with the dusty surface of that day and seeking to hide themselves within its pale hours. Opposing them was the place they had abandoned and to which they had somehow returned. Only one had not gone with them. He had stayed in the skeleton town,

and now they had come back to it, though none of them could say how or why this had happened.

A tall, bearded man who wore a flat-brimmed hat looked up at the sky. Within the clouds was a great seeping darkness, the overflow of the coming night and of a blackness no one had ever seen. After a moment the man said, "It will be dark soon." His words were almost whispered and the effort of speaking appeared to take the last of his strength. But it was not simply a depleted vigor that kept him and the others from turning about and making a second exodus from the town.

No one could say how far they had gone before they reversed their course and turned back toward the place which they believed themselves to have abandoned forever. They could not remember what juncture or dead end they had reached that aborted the evacuation. Part of that day was lost to them, certain images and experiences hidden away. They could feel these things closeted somewhere in their minds, even if they could not call them to memory. They were sure they had seen something they should not remember. And so no one suggested that they set out again on the road that would take them from the town. Yet they could not accept staying in that place.

A paralysis had seized them, that state of soul known to those who dwell on the highest plane of madness, aristocrats of insanity whose nightmares confront them on either side of sleep. Soon enough the wrenching effect of this psychic immobility became far less tolerable than the prospect of simply giving up and staying in the town. Such was the case with at least one of these cataleptic puppets, a sticklike woman who said, "We have no choice. He has stayed in *his*

house." Then another voice among them shouted, "He has stayed too long."

A sudden wind moved through the streets, flapping the garments of the weary homecomers and swinging the traffic light that hung over their heads. For a moment all the signals lit up in every direction, disturbing the deep gray twilight. The colors drenched the bricks of buildings and were reflected in windows with a strange intensity. Then the traffic light was dark once more, its fit of transformation done.

The man wearing the flat-brimmed hat spoke again, straining his whispery voice. "We must meet together after we have rested."

As the crowd of thin bodies sluggishly dispersed few words were exchanged among them. An old woman shuffling along the sidewalk did not address anyone in particular when she said, "Blessed is the seed that is planted forever in darkness."

Someone who had heard this utterance looked at the old woman and asked, "Missus, what did you say?" But the old woman appeared genuinely confused to learn she had said anything at all.

Before long everyone in Moxton had shut themselves in their houses, and the town seemed deserted. A few streetlights shone on the dull façades of buildings: small shops, a modest restaurant, a church of indefinite denomination, and even a movie theater, which no one had patronized for some weeks. Surrounding this area were the usual antiquated houses that collect about the periphery of skeleton towns. These were structures of serene desolation that had settled into the orbit of a dead star. They were simple pinewood

coffins, full of stillness, leaning upright against a silent sky. Yet it was this silence that allowed sounds from a fantastic distance to be carried into it. And the stillness of these houses and their narrow streets led the eye to places astonishingly remote.

Despite the plainness of the neighborhoods that clutter the margins of a skeleton town, there is often an intriguing atmosphere created by certain locales and structures within them. Often no mention is made of this peculiar virtue by the residents of such places. As an instance, there may be a house that does not stand *along* one of those narrow streets but at its *end*. This house may even be somewhat different from the others in the neighborhood. Possibly it is taller than the other houses or displays a weathervane that spins in the wind of storms. Perhaps its sole distinguishing quality is that it has been long unoccupied, making it available as an empty vessel in which much of that magical desolation of narrow streets and coffin-shaped houses comes to settle and distill like an essence of the old alchemists. It seems part of a design—some great inevitability—that this house should exist among the other houses that clutch at the edges of a skeleton town. And the sense of this vast, all-encompassing design in fact arises within the spindly residents of the area when one day, unexpectedly, there arrives a red-headed man with the key to this particular house.

2

The One Who Stayed Behind

In the house where a man named Ray Starns and a succession of others before him once resided, Andrew Maness

ascended the stairway leading to the uppermost floor and there entered a small room that he had converted to a study and a chamber of meditation. The window in this room looked out over the rooftops of Moxton and some distance beyond its streets. He had watched as everyone abandoned the town, and he watched them when they returned. He was still watching after they had all retreated to their homes, every one of them brightly illuminated throughout the night.

Looking away from the window, he fixed his eyes on a large book that lay open on his desk a few steps across the room. The pages of the book were brown and brittle as fallen leaves. “Your wild words were true,” he said to the book. “My friends did not go far before they were sent trudging back. You know what made them come home, but I can only guess. So many things you have elaborately disclosed, yet you offer nothing on this point. As your pages say, ‘The last vision dies with him who beholds it. Blessed is the seed that is planted forever in darkness.’ But the seed that has been planted still grows.”

Andrew Maness closed the book. Written in dark ink upon its cover was the word TSALAL.

His eyes then looked around the room, which had not seemed so small to him in the days when he and his father occupied the house, days too long ago for anyone else to recall with clarity. He alone was able to review those times with a sure memory, and he summoned the image of a small bed in a far corner of the room.

As a child he would lie awake deep into the night, his eyes wandering about the moonlit room that seemed so great to his doll-like self. How the shadows enlarged that room,

opening certain sections of it to the black abyss beyond the house and beyond the blackness of night, reaching into a blackness no one had ever seen. During these moments things seemed to be changing all around him, and it felt as if he had something to do with this changing. The shadows on the pale walls began to curl about like smoke, creating a swirling murkiness that at times approached sensible shapes —the imperfect zoology of cloud-forms—but soon drifted into hazy nonsense. Smoky shadows gathered everywhere in the room.

It appeared to him that he could see what was making these shadows which moved so slowly and smoothly change their shapes in uncanny ways. In the moonlight he could see the candle in its tarnished holder resting on the bed stand. The candle had burned quite low when he blew out its flame hours before. Now it was shooting upwards like a flower growing too fast, and it sprouted outward with tallowy vines and blossoms, waxy wings and limbs, pale hands with wriggling fingers and other parts he could not name. When he looked across the room he saw that something was moving back and forth upon the windowsill with a staggered motion. This was a wooden soldier which suddenly stretched out the claws of a crab and began clicking them against the windowpanes. Other things that he could barely see were also changing in the room, and he knew that he was doing something to make these changes happen. But this time he could not stop the changes. It seemed the end of everything, the infernal apocalypse.

Only when he felt his father shaking him did he become aware that he had been screaming. Soon he grew quiet. The candle on his bed stand now burned brightly and was not as

it had been a few moments before. He quickly surveyed the room to verify that nothing else remained changed. The wooden soldier was lying on the floor, and its two arms were fixed by its sides.

He looked at his father, who was sitting on the bed and still had on the same dark clothes he had worn when he held church services earlier that day. Sometimes he would see his father asleep in one of the chairs in the parlor or nodding at his desk where he was working on his next sermon. But he had never known his father to sleep during the night.

The Reverend Maness spoke his son's name, and the younger Andrew Maness focused on his father's narrow face, recognizing the crown of white hair, which yet retained a hint of red, and the oval-shaped spectacles reflecting the candle flame. The old man whispered to the boy, as if they were not alone in the house or were engaged in some conspiracy.

“Has it happened again, Andrew?” he asked.

“I did not want to make it happen,” Andrew protested. “I was not by myself.”

The Reverend Maness held up an open hand of silence and understanding. The glare of the candlelight on his spectacles concealed his eyes, which now turned toward the window beside his son's bed. “The mystery of lawlessness doth already work,” he said.

“The Epistles,” Andrew swiftly responded, as if the quote had been the question.

“Can you finish the passage?”

“I think I can,” answered Andrew, who then assumed a solemn voice and recited: “Now there is one that restraineth, until he be taken out of the way; and then shall be

revealed the lawless one, whom the Lord will slay and bring to nought."

"You know it well, that book."

"The Holy Bible," said Andrew, for it sounded strange to him not to name the book in the proper way.

"Yes, the Holy Bible. You should know its words better than you know anything else on earth. You should always have its words in mind like a magical formula."

"I do, Father. You have always told me that I should."

The Reverend Maness suddenly stood up from the bed and towering over his son shouted: "Liar! You did not have the words in your mind on this night. You could not have. You allowed the lawless one to do its work. *You* are the lawless one, but you must not be. You must become the other one, the *katechon*, the one who restrains."

"I'm sorry, Father," Andrew cried out. "Please don't be angry with me."

The Reverend Maness recovered his temper and again held up his open hand, the fingers of which interlocked and separated several times in what appeared to be a deliberate sequence of subtle gesticulations. He turned away from his son and slowly walked the length of the room. When he reached the window on the opposite side he stared out at the blackness that covered the town of Moxton, where he and his son had first arrived some years before. On the main street of the town the reverend had built a church. The silhouette of the church bell-tower was outlined against moonlit clouds. From across the room the Reverend Maness said to his son, "I built the church in town so that it would be seen. I made the church of brick so that it would endure."

Now he paced the floor in an attitude of meditation while his son looked on in silence. After some time he stood at the foot of his son's bed, glaring down as though he stood at the pulpit of his church. “In the Bible there is a beast,” he said. “You know this, Andrew. But did you know that the beast is also within you? It lives in a place that can never see light. Yes, it is housed here, inside the skull, the habitation of the Great Beast. It is a thing so wonderful in form that its existence might be attributed to the fantastic conjuring of a sorcerer or to a visitation from a far, dark place which no one has ever seen. It is a nightmare that would stop our hearts should we ever behold it gleaming in some shadowy corner of our home, or should we ever—by terrible mischance—place our hands upon the slime of its flesh. This must never happen. The beast must be kept within its lair and not reach out into the world. By now you must know that the beast is a great power that may work changes on the world. Darkness and light, shape and color, the heavens and the earth—all may be transformed by the beast, the great molder of things seen and unseen, known and unknown. For all that we see and know are but empty vessels in which the beast shall pour a new essence, therewith changing the aspect of the land, altering the shadows themselves, giving a strange color to our days and our nights, making the day *int*o night, so that we dream while awake and can never sleep again. There is nothing more awful and nothing more sinful than such changes in things. Nothing is more grotesque than these changes. All changes in things are grotesque. The very possibility of changes in things is grotesque. And the beast is the author of all changes. You must never again consort with the beast!”

“Don't say that, Father!” Andrew screamed, the palms of his hands pressed to his ears in order to obstruct further words of judgment. Yet he heard them all the same.

“You are repentant, but still you do not read the book.”

“I do read the book.”

“But you do not have the words of the book always in your mind, because you are always reading other books that are forbidden to you. I have seen you looking at my books, and I know that you take them from my shelves like a thief. Those are books that should not be read.”

“Then why do you keep them?” Andrew shouted back, knowing that it was evil to question his father and feeling a great joy in having done so. The Reverend Maness stepped around to the side of the bed, his spectacles flashing in the candlelight.

“I keep them,” he said, “so that you may learn by your own will to renounce what is forbidden in whatever shape it may appear.”

But how wonderful were those books that were forbidden to him. He remembered seeing them for the first time cloistered on high shelves in his father's library, that small and windowless room at the very heart of the house the Reverend Maness had built. Andrew knew these books on sight, not only by the titles which had such words in them as Mystery, Haunted, Secret, and Shadow, but also by the characters that formed these words—a jagged script closely resembling the letters of his own Bible—and by the shades of their cloth bindings, the faded vestments of autumn twilights. He somehow knew these books were forbidden to him, even before the reverend had made this fact explicit to his son and caused the boy to feel ashamed of his desire to hold these

books and to know their matter. He became bound to the worlds he imagined were revealed in the books, obsessed with what he conceived to be a cosmology of nightmares. And after he had wrongfully admitted himself to his father's library, he began to plot in detail the map of a mysterious universe—a place where the sun had passed from view, where towns were cold and dark, where mountains trembled with the monstrosities they concealed, woods rattled with secret winds, and all the seas were horribly calm. In his dreams of this universe, which far surpassed the darkest visions of any of the books he had read, a never-ending night had fallen upon every imaginable landscape.

In sleep he might thus find himself standing at the rim of a great gorge filled with pointed evergreens, and in the distance were the peaks of hills appearing in black silhouette under a sky chaotic with stars. Sublime scenery of this type often recurred in those books forbidden to him, sometimes providing the subject for one of the engraved illustrations accompanying a narrative. But he had never read in any book what his dreams showed him in the sky above the gorge and above the hills. For in these dreams each of the bright, bristling stars would begin to loosen in the places where the blackness held them. They wobbled at first, and then they rolled over in their bed of night. Now it was the other side of the stars he saw, which was unlike anything ever displayed to the eyes of the earth. What he could see resembled not stars but something more like the underside of large stones one might overturn deep in damp woods. They had changed in the strangest way, changed because everything in the universe was changing and could no longer be protected from the changes being worked upon

them by something that had been awakened in the blackness, something that desired to remold everything it could see... and had the power to see all things. Now the faces of the stars were crawling with things that made them gleam in a way that stars had never gleamed before. And then these things he saw in his dreams began to drip from the stars toward the earth, streaking the night with their gleaming trails.

In those nights of dreaming, all things were subject to forces that knew nothing of law or reason, and nothing possessed its own nature or essence but was only a mask upon the face of absolute darkness, a blackness no one had ever seen.

Even as a child he realized that his dreams did not follow the creation taught to him by his father and by *that book*. It was another creation he pursued, a counter-creation, and the books on the shelves of his father's library could not reveal to him what he desired to know of this other genesis. While denying it to his father, and often to himself, he dreamed of reading the book that was truly forbidden, the scripture of a deadly creation, one that would tell the tale of the universe in its purest sense.

But where could he find such a book? On what shelf of what library would it appear before his eyes? Would he recognize it when fortune allowed it to fall into his hands? Over time he became certain he would know the book, so often did he dream of it. For in the most unlikely visions he found himself in possession of the book, as though it belonged to him as a legacy. But while he held the book in dreams, and even saw its words with miraculous clarity, he could not comprehend the substance of a script whose mean-

ing seemed to dissolve into nonsense. Never was he granted in these dreams an understanding of what the book had to tell him. Only as the strangest and most subtle sensations did it communicate with his mind, only as a kind of nebulous presence that murmured in his sleep. On waking, all that remained was a euphoric terror. And it was then that objects around him would begin their transformations, for his soul had been made lawless by dreams and his mind was filled with the words of the wrong book.

3

The Author of the Book

"You knew it was hopeless," said Andrew Maness as he stood over the book that lay on the desk, glaring at the pages of old handwriting in black ink. "You told me to always read the right words and to always have them in my mind, but you knew I would read the wrong words. You knew what I was. You knew that such a being existed only to read the wrong words and to want to see those words written across the sky in a black script. Because you yourself wrote those words—*you were the author of the book*. And you brought your son to the place where he would read your words. This town was the wrong place, and you knew it was the wrong place. But you told yourself it was the only place where what you had done… might be undone. You became afraid of what you and those others had done. For years you were intrigued by the greatest madness, the most atrocious secrets and schemes, and then you became afraid. What did you discover that could make you so afraid, you and the others who were so in the grip of the monstrous things you told of in the

book? You preached to me that all change is grotesque, that the very possibility of change is evil. Yet in the book you declare 'transformation as the only truth'—the only truth of the Tsalal—the one who is without law or reason. 'There is no nature to things,' you wrote in the book. 'There are no faces except masks held tight against the pitching chaos behind them.' You wrote that there is not true growth or evolution in the life of this world but only transformations of appearance, an incessant melting and molding of surfaces without underlying essence. Above all you pronounced that there is no salvation of any being because no beings exist as such, nothing exists to be saved—everything, everyone exists only to be drawn into the slow and endless swirling of mutations that we may see every second of our lives if we simply gaze through the eyes of the Tsalal.

"Yet these truths of yours that you kept writing in your book cannot be the reason you became afraid, for even while your voice is somber or trembling when speaking of these things, your phrases are burdened with fascination and you are always marveling at the grand mockery of the universal masquerade, the 'hallucination of lies that obscures the vision of all but the elect of the Tsalal.' It is something of which you will not speak or cannot speak that caused you to become afraid. What did you discover that you could not face without renouncing what you and those others had done, without running to this town to hide yourself in the doctrines of a church that you did not truly uphold? Why should this discovery impel you to take flight from it, if only in memory? What knowledge allowed you to prophesy that the people of Moxton would return to their town, yet prevented you from telling what phenomenon could be more

terrible than the nightmare they had fled, those grotesque changes which had overtaken the streets and houses of this place?

"You knew this was the wrong place when you brought me here as a child. And I knew this was the wrong place when I came home to this town and stayed here until everyone knew that I had stayed too long."

4

The White-haired Woman

Not long after Andrew Maness moved back to the town of Moxton, an old woman came up to him late one afternoon on the street. He was staring into the window of a repair shop that closed early. Corroded pieces of machinery were strewn before him, as if on display: the guts and bones of a defunct motor of some kind. His reverie was disturbed when the old woman said, "I've seen you before."

"That is possible, ma'am," he replied. "I moved into a house on Oakman a few weeks ago."

"No, I mean that I've seen you before that."

He smiled very slightly at the old woman and said, "I lived here for a time when I was a child, but I didn't think anyone would remember."

"I remember the hair. It's red but kind of greenish too, yellow maybe."

"Discolored through the years," he explained.

"I remember it the way it was. And it's not much different now. My hair's white as salt."

"Yes, ma'am," he said.

“I told those damn fools I remembered. No one listens to me. What's your name?”

“My name, Mrs... .”

“Spikes,” she snapped.

“My name, Mrs. Spikes, is Andrew Maness.”

“Maness, Maness,” she chanted to herself. “No, I don't think I ever knew anyone named Maness. You're in the Starns house.”

“It was in fact purchased from one of Mr. Starns's family who inherited the house after he died.”

“Used to be the Waterses lived there. Before them the Wellses. And before them the McQuisters. But that's getting to be before my time. Before the McQuisters is just too damn long to remember. Too damn long.” She was repeating these words as she charged off down the street. Andrew Maness watched her thin form and salt-white hair recede and lose all color in the drab surroundings of the skeleton town.

5

Revelations of a Unique Being

For Andrew Maness, the world was divided into one of two realms that could be discerned only by what he called a *prejudice of soul*. Wherever he was, the particular realm he inhabited was revealed to him by the psychic response he would have to its atmospheric configurations, so that he would know if it was a place that was *right* for him or one that was *wrong*. In places of the former type he was aware of a separation between his sense of self and the world around him, an absence that felt natural to the common run of the human species. These were the right places. There was noth-

ing unsettling about the empty spaces between our inner selves and the phenomena we perceived to exist outside us. No threat presented itself to him in such places, which comprised all of reality for nearly the whole of our race. But there were also other places—wrong places for Andrew Maness—where a presence of some dreadful kind was allowed to enter, a force that did not belong to these places yet moved freely within them… and within him. It was precisely such places and their residing presence that came to govern his life and determine its course. In the foregoing state of affairs he had no choice, for this was the scheme of the *elect* who had generated him, and he was compelled to fall in with their design. He was in fact the very substance of their design.

His father knew that there were certain places in the world to which his son must respond, even in his childhood, and which would cause him to undergo a second birth under the sign of the Tsalal. The Reverend Maness knew that the town of Moxton was among such places—outposts on the desolate borderlands of the real. He said that he had brought his son to this town so that the boy would learn to resist the presence he would feel here and elsewhere in the world. He said that he had brought his son to the right place, but he had in fact brought him to a place that was entirely wrong for the being that he was. And he said that his son should always fill his mind with the words of that book. But these words were easily silenced and usurped by those other words in those other books. His father seemed to entice him into reading the very books he should not have read. Soon these books provoked in Andrew Maness the sense of that presence which may manifest itself in a place such as the

town of Moxton. And there were other places where he felt that same presence. Following intuitions that grew stronger as he grew older, Andrew Maness would find such places sometimes by hazard and sometimes by design.

Perhaps he would come upon an abandoned house standing shattered and bent in an isolated landscape—a raw skeleton in a boneyard. But this dilapidated structure would seem to him a temple, a wayside shrine to that presence with which he sought union, and also a doorway to the dark world in which it dwelled. Nothing can convey those sensations, the countless nuances of trembling excitement, as he approached such a decomposed edifice whose skewed and ragged outline suggested another order of existence, the truest order of existence, as though such places as this house were only wavering shadows cast down to earth by a distant, unseen realm of entity. There he would experience the touch of something outside himself, something whose will was confused with his own, as in a dream wherein one feels possessed of a fantastic power to determine what events will transpire and yet also feels helpless to control that power, which, *through* oneself, may produce the chaos of nightmare. This mingling of mastery and helplessness overwhelmed him with a black intoxication and suggested his life's goal: *to work the great wheel that turns in darkness, and to be broken upon it.*

Yet Andrew Maness had always known that his ambition was an echo of that conceived many years ago by his father and those others, and that the pursuit of this ambition had been consummated in his own birth.

Not Much More than a Century Ago

"As a young man," the Reverend Maness explained to his son, who was now a young man himself, "I thought myself an adept in the magic of the old gods, a communicant of entities both demonic and divine. I did not comprehend for years that I was merely a curator in the museum where the old gods were on display, their replicas and corpses set up in the countless galleries of the *invisible*... and now the *extinct*. I knew that in past millennia these beings had always replaced one another as each of them passed away along with the worlds that worshipped them. This mirror-like succession of supreme monarchs may still seem eternal to those who have not sensed the great shadow which has always been positioned behind every deity or pantheon. Yet I was able to sense this shadow and see that it eclipsed the old gods without in any way being among their kind. For it was older than they, the dark background against which they had forever carried on their escapades as best they could. But its emergence into the foreground of things was something new, an advent occurring not much more than a century ago. Perhaps this great blackness, this shadow, has always prevailed on worlds other than our own, places that have never known the gods of *order*, the gods of *design*. Even this world had long prepared for it, creating certain places where the illusion of reality was worn quite thin and where the gods of order and design could barely breathe. Such places as this town of Moxton became fertile ground for this blackness no one had ever seen.

"Yes, it was not much more than a century ago that the people of this world betrayed their awareness of a new god

that was not a god. Such awareness may never be complete, never reach a true agony of illumination, except among the elect. I myself was slow in coming to it. The authenticity of my enlightenment may seem questionable and arbitrary, considering its source. Nonetheless, there is a tradition of revelation, an ancient protocol, by which knowledge of the unseen is delivered to us through inspired texts. And it is by means of these scriptures dictated from beyond that we of this world may discover what we cannot experience in a direct confrontation. So it was with the Tsalal. But the book that I have written, and which I have named *Tsalal*, is not the revealed codex of which I am speaking. It is only a reflection, or rather a distillation, of those other writings in which I first detected the existence, the emergence, of the Tsalal itself.

"Of course, there have always been writings of a certain kind, a primeval lore which provided allusions to the darkness of creation and to monstrosities of every type, human and inhuman, as if there were a difference. Something profoundly dark and grotesque has always had a life in every language of this world, appearing at intervals and throwing its shadow for a moment upon stories that try to make sense of things, often confounding the most happy tale. And this shadow is never banished in any of these stories, however we may pretend otherwise. The darkness of the grotesque is an immortal enigma. In all the legends of the dead, in all the tales of creatures of the night, in all the mythologies of mad gods and lucid demons, there remains a kind of mocking nonsense to the end, a thick and resonant voice which calls out from the heart of these stories and declares: 'Still I am here.' And the idiot laughter of that voice—how it sounds

through the ages! This laughter often reaches our ears through certain stories wherein this grotesque spirit itself has had a hand. However we have tried to ignore the laughter of this voice, however we have tried to overwhelm its words and protect ourselves by always keeping other words in our minds, it still sounds throughout the world.

"But it was not much more than a century ago that this laughter began to rise to a pitch. You have heard it yourself, Andrew, as you furtively made incursions into my library during your younger days, reveling in a Gothic feast of the grotesque. These books do not hold an arcane knowledge intended for the select few but were written for a world which had begun to slight the gods of order and design, to question their very existence and to exult in the disorders of the grotesque. Both of us have now studied the books in which the Tsalal was being gradually revealed as the very nucleus of our universe, even if their authors remained innocent of the revelations they were perpetrating. It was from one of the most enlightened of this sect of Gothic storytellers that I took the name of that one. You recall, Andrew, the adventures of an Arthur Pym in a fantastic land where everything, people and landscape alike, is of a *perfect blackness*—the Antarctic country of Tsalal. This was among the finest evocations I had discovered of that blackness no one had ever seen, a literary unveiling of being without soul or substance, without meaning or necessity—not a universe of design and order but one whose sole principle was that of senseless transmutation. A universe of the grotesque. And from that moment it became my ambition to invoke what I now called the Tsalal, and ultimately to effect a worldly incarnation of the thing itself.

“Through the years I found there were others who had become entranced with an ambition so near to my own that we formed a league… the Elect of the Tsalal. They too had been adepts of the old gods who had been made impotent or extinct by the emergence of that one, an inevitable advent which we were avid to hasten and in which we desired to lose ourselves. For we had recognized the mask of our identities, and our only consolation for what we had lost, a perverse salvation, was to embrace the fatality of the Tsalal. Vital to this end was a woman upon whose structure was performed a ceremony of conception. And it was during these rites that we first came into the most intimate communion with that one, which moved within us all and worked the most wonderful changes upon so many things.

“None of us suspected how it would be when we gathered that last night. This all happened in another country, an older country. But it was nevertheless a place like this town of Moxton, a place where the appearances of this world seem to waver at times, hovering before one's eyes as a mere fog. This place was known among our circle as the Street of Lamps, which was the very heart of a district under the sign of the Tsalal. In recollection, the lamps seem only a quirk of scene, an accident of atmosphere, but at the time they were to use the eyes of the Tsalal itself. These sidewalk fixtures of radiant glass upheld by dark metal stems formed a dream-like procession up and down the street, a spectacle of infinite pathos and mystery. One poet of the era called them ‘iron lilies,’ and another compared their jewel-like illumination to yellow topaz. In a different language, and a different city, these devices—*les réverbères*, *les becs de gaz*—were also celeb-

rated, an enigmatic sign of a century, a world, that was guttering out.

"It was in this street that we prepared a room for your birth and your nurturing under the sign of the Tsalal. There were few other residents in this ramshackle area, and they abandoned it long before you were born, frightened off by changes that all of us could see taking place in the Street of Lamps. At first the changes were slight. Spiders had begun laying webs upon the stones of the street and thin strands of smoke spun out from chimney stacks, tangling together in the sky. When the night of your birth arrived the changes became more intense. They were focused on the room in which we gathered to chant the invocation to the Tsalal. We incanted throughout the night, standing in a circle around the woman upon whose structure was performed the ceremony of conception. Did I mention that she was not one of us? No, she was a gaunt denizen of the Street of Lamps whose body we appropriated some months before, an honorary member of our sect whom we treated very well during her term of captivity. As the moment of your birth drew closer she lay upon the floor of the ceremonial room and began screaming in many different voices. We did not expect her to survive the ordeal. Neither did we expect the immediate consequences of the incarnation we attempted to effect, the consummation of a bond between this woman and the Tsalal.

"We were inviting chaos into the world, we knew this. We had been intoxicated by the prospect of an absolute disorder. With a sense of grim exaltation we greeted the *intimations* of a universal nightmare—the ultimate point of things. But on that night, even as we invoked the Tsalal within that

room, we came to experience a realm of the unreal hitherto unknown to us. And we discovered that it had never been our want to immerse ourselves in the unreal, not in the manner which threatened us in the Street of Lamps. For as you, Andrew, began to enter the world through this woman, so was the Tsalal also entering the world through this woman. She was now the *seed* of that one, her flesh radiant and swelling in the fertile ground of the unreal which was that lamplit street. We looked beyond the windows of that room, already contemplating our escape. But then we saw that there was no longer any street, nor any buildings along that street. All that remained were the lamp lights with their harsh yellow glow like rotten stars, endless rows of streetlamps that ascended into the all-encompassing blackness. Can you imagine—endless rows of streetlamps ascending into the blackness? Everything that sustained the reality of the world around us had been drained away. We noticed how our own bodies had become suddenly drawn and meager, while the body of that woman, the seed of the coming apocalypse, was becoming ever more swollen with the power and magic of the Tsalal. And we knew at that moment what needed to be done if we were ever to escape the unreality that had been sown in that place called the Street of Lamps —that place of a blackness no one had ever seen."

7

A Skeleton Town

Even in the time of the McQuisters, which almost no one could remember very well, Moxton was a skeleton town. No building there had ever seemed new. Every crud-covered

brick or faded board, every crusted shingle or frayed awning appeared to be handed down from the demise of another structure in another town, cast-offs of a thriving center that had no use for worn-out materials. The front windows of stores were cloudy with a confusion of reflected images from someplace else. Entire establishments might have been dumped off in Moxton, where buildings stood along the street like odd objects forgotten on a cellar shelf.

It was less a real town than the semblance of a town, a pasteboard backdrop to an old stage show, its outlines crudely stroked with an antique paintbrush unconcerned with the details of character and identity, lettering the names of streets and shops with senseless scribbles no one was ever meant to read. Everything that might have been real about the town had somehow become thwarted. Nothing flourished there, nothing made a difference by its presence or absence.

No business could do more than anonymously survive in Moxton. Even larger enterprises such as a dime store or a comfortable hotel could not assert themselves but were forced to assume the same air of unreality possessed by lesser establishments: the shoe store whose tiny front window displayed merchandise long out of style, the clothes store where dust collected in the folds of garments worn by headless manikins, the repair shop at which a good number of the items brought in were left unclaimed and lay corroding in every cranny of the place.

Many years ago a movie theater opened on the prominent corner of Webster and Main, decades before a traffic light had been hung over the intersection of these streets. A large neon sign with letters stacked in a vertical file spelled out

the word RIVIERA. For a moment this word appeared in searing magenta against the Moxton twilight, calling up and down the street to everyone in the town. But by nightfall the glowing letters had been subdued, their glamour suffocating in a rarefied atmosphere where sights and sounds were drained of reality. The new movie theater now burned no more brightly than McQuister's Pharmacy across the street. Both of them were allotted a steady and modest patronage in a skeleton town that was no more enchanted with the one than the other.

Thus was the extent of Moxton's compromise with any manifestation of the real. For there are certain places that exist on the wayside of the real: a house, a street, even entire towns which have claims upon them by virtue of some nameless affinity with the most remote orders of being. Such places are fertile ground for the unreal and retain the minimum of immunity against exotic disorders and aberrations. Their concessions to a given fashion of reality are only placating gestures, a way of stifling it through limited acceptance. It was unnecessary, even perverse, to resist construction of the movie theater or the new church (founded in 1893 by the Rev. Andrew Maness). Such an action might imbue these things with an unwarranted measure of substance or power, and in a skeleton town there is little substance, while all power resides only in the unreal. The citizens of such a place are custodians of a rare property, a precious estate whose true owners are momentarily absent. All that remains before full proprietorship of the land may be assumed is the planting of a single seed and its nurturing over a sufficient period of time, an interval that has nothing to do with the hours and days of the world.

8

A Plea in the Past

As Andrew Maness grew older in the town of Moxton he watched his father submit to the despair and the wonder that he could not unmake the thing that he and those others had *incarnated*. On several occasions the reverend entered his son's room as the boy slept. With knife and ax and long-handled scythe he attempted to break the growing bond between his son and the Tsalal. In the morning young Andrew's bedroom would reek of a slaughterhouse. But his limbs and organs were again made whole and a new blood flowed within them, proving the reality of what had been brought into the world by his father and those other enthusiasts of that one.

There were times when the Reverend Maness, in a state of awe and desperation, awoke his son from dreams and made his appeal to the boy, informing him that he was reaching a perilous juncture in his development and begging him to submit to a peculiar ritual that would be consummated by Andrew's ruin.

“What ritual is this?” Andrew asked with a novitiate's excitation. But the reverend's powers of speech became paralyzed at this question and many nights would pass before he again broached the subject.

At last the Reverend Maness came into his son's room carrying a book. He opened the book to its final pages and began to read. And the words he read laid out a scheme for his son's destruction. These words were his own, the ultimate chapter in a great work he had composed documenting

a wealth of revelations concerning the force or entity called the Tsalal.

Andrew could not take his eyes off the book and strained to hear every resonance of his father's reading from it, even if the ritual the old man spelled out dictated the atrocious manner of Andrew's death—the obliteration of the seed of the apocalypse which was called the Tsalal.

“Your formula for canceling my existence calls for the participation of others,” Andrew observed. “The elect of… that one.”

“Tsalal,” the Reverend Maness intoned, still captivated by an occult nomenclature.

“Tsalal,” Andrew echoed. “My protector, my guardian of the black void.”

“You are not yet wholly the creature of that one. I have tried to change what I could not. But you have stayed too long in this place, which was the wrong place for a being such as you. You are undergoing a second birth under the sign of the Tsalal. But there is still enough time if you will submit yourself to the ritual.”

“I must ask you, Father: who will carry it out? Will there be a convocation of strangers in this town?”

After a painfully reflective pause, the reverend said: “There are none remaining who will come. They would be required to relive the events following your birth, the first time you were born.”

“And my mother?” Andrew asked.

“She did not survive.”

“But how did she die?”

“By the ritual,” the Reverend Maness confessed. “At the ritual of your birth it became necessary to perform the ritual

of death."

"Her death."

"As I told you before. This ritual had never been performed, or even conceived, prior to that night on which you were born. We did not know what to expect. But after a certain point, after seeing certain things, we acted in the correct manner, as if we had always known what needed to be done."

"And what needed to be done, Father?"

"It is all in this book."

"You have the book, but you're still lacking for those others. A congregation, so to speak."

"I have my congregation in this very town. They will do what needs to be done. To this you must submit yourself. To the end of your existence you must consent."

"And if I don't?"

"Soon," the Reverend Maness began, "the bond will be sealed between you and the other, that one which is a nightmare of grotesque metamorphoses behind the dream of earthly forms, that one which is the center of so-called entity and so-called essence. To the living illusions of the world of light will come a blackness no one has ever seen, a dawn of darkness. What you yourself have known of these things is only a passing glimpse, a flickering candle-flame beside the conflagration which is to come. You have found yourself fascinated by those moments after you have been asleep, and awake to see how the things around you are affected in their form. You look on as they change in every freakish manner, feeling the power that changes them to be connected to your own being, conveying to you its magic through a delicate cord. Then the cord grows too thin to hold, your mind re-

turns to you, and the little performances you were watching come to an end. But you have already stayed long enough in this place to have begun a second birth under the sign of the Tsalal. The cord between you and that one is strong. Wherever you go, you will be found. Wherever you stay, there the changes will begin. *For you are the seed of that one.* You are just as the *luz*, the bone-seed of rabbinic prophecy—that sliver of every mortal self from which the whole body may be reconstructed and stand for judgment at the end of time. Wherever you stay, there the resurrection will begin. You are a fragment of the one that is without law or reason. The body that will grow out of you is the true body of all things. The changes themselves are the body of the Tsalal. The changes are the truth of all bodies, which we believe have a face and a substance only because we cannot see that they are always changing, that they are only fragile forms which are forever being shattered in the violent whirlpool of truth.

"This is how it will be for all your days. You will be drawn to a place that reveals the sign of the Tsalal—an aspect of the unreal, a forlorn glamor in things—and with your coming the changes will begin. These may go unnoticed for a time, affecting only very small things or greater things in subtle ways, a disruption of forms that you very well know. But other people will sense that something is wrong in that place, which may be a certain house or street or even an entire town. They will go about with uneasy eyes and become emaciated in their flesh, their very bones growing thin with worry, becoming worn down and warped just as the world around them is slowly stripped of whatever seemed real, leaving them famished for the sustenance of old illusions.

Rumors will begin to pass among them about unpleasant things they believe they have seen or felt and yet cannot explain—perhaps some confusion in the anatomies of the lower creatures or a stone that seems to throb with a faint life. For these are the modest beginnings of the chaos that will ultimately consume the stars themselves, which may be left to crawl within that great blackness no one has ever seen. And by their proximity to your being they will know that you are the source of these changes, that *through your being* these changes radiate into the world. The longer you stay in a place, the worse it will become. If you leave such a place in time, then the changes can have no lasting power—the ultimate point will not have been reached, and it will be as the little performances of grotesquerie you have witnessed in your own room."

"And if I do stay in such a place?" asked Andrew.

"Then the changes will proceed toward the ultimate point. So long as you can bear to watch the appearances of things become degraded and confused, so long as you can bear to watch the people in that place wither in their bodies and minds, the changes will proceed toward their ultimate point—the disintegration of all apparent order, the birth of the Tsalal. Before that happens you must submit to the ritual of the ultimate point."

But Andrew Maness only laughed at his father's scheme, and the sound of this laughter almost shattered the reverend entirely. In a deliberately serious voice, Andrew said: "Do you really believe you will gain the participation of others?"

"The people of this town will do the work of the ritual," his father replied. "When they have seen certain things, they will do what must be done. Their hunger to preserve the illu-

sions of their world will surpass their horror at what must be done to save it. But it will be your decision whether or not you will submit to the ritual which will determine the course of so many things in this world."

9

A meeting in Moxton

Everyone in the town gathered in the church that the Reverend Maness had built so many years ago. No others had succeeded the reverend, and no services had been held since the time of his pastorate. The structure had never been outfitted with electricity, but the illumination of numerous candles and oil lamps the congregation had brought supplemented the light of a grayish afternoon that penetrated the two rows of plain, peaked windows along either side of the church. In the corner of one of those windows a spider fumbled about in its web, struggling awkwardly with appendages that resembled less the nimble legs of the arachnid than they did an octet of limp tentacles. After several thrusts the creature reached the surface of a window pane and passed into the glass itself, where it began to move about freely in its new element.

The people of Moxton had tried to rest themselves before this meeting, but their haggard look spoke of a failure to do so. The entire population of the town barely filled a half dozen pews at the front of the church, although some were collapsed upon the floor and others shuffled restlessly along the center aisle. All of them appeared even more emaciated than the day before, when they had attempted to escape the town and unaccountably found themselves driven back to it.

“Everything has gotten worse since we returned,” said one man, as if to initiate the meeting which had no obvious hope or purpose beyond collecting in a single place the nightmares of the people of Moxton. A murmur of voices rose up and echoed throughout the church. Several people spoke of what they had witnessed the night before, reciting a litany of grotesque phenomena that had prohibited sleep.

There was a bedroom wall which changed colors, turning from its normal rosy tint that was calm and pale in the moonlight to a quivering and luminescent green that rippled like the flesh of a great reptile. There was a little doll whose neck began to elongate until it was writhing through the air like a serpent, while its tiny doll's head whispered words that had no sense in them yet conveyed a profoundly hideous meaning. There were things no one had seen that made noises of a deeply troubling nature in the darkness of cellars or behind the doors of closets and cupboards. And then there was something that people saw when they looked through the windows of their houses toward the house where a man named Andrew Maness now lived. But when anyone began to describe what it was they saw in the vicinity of that house, which they called the McQuister house, their words became confused. They did see something and yet they saw nothing.

“I also saw what you speak of,” whispered the tall, bearded man who wore a flat-brimmed hat. “It was a blackness, but it was not the blackness of night or the blackness of shadows. It was hovering over the old McQuister place, or around it. This was something I had not seen in Moxton even since the changes.”

“No, not in Moxton, not *in the town*. But you *have* seen it before. We have all seen it,” said a man's voice that sounded as if it came from elsewhere in the church.

“Yes,” answered the tall man, as if confessing a thing that had formerly been denied. “But we are not seeing it the way it might be seen, the way we had seen it when we were outside the town, when we tried to leave and could not.”

“That was not blackness we saw then,” said one of the younger women who seemed to be wresting an image from her memory. “It was something… something that wasn't blackness at all.”

“There were different things,” shouted an old man who suddenly stood up from one of the pews, his eyes fixed in a gaze of revelation. A moment later this vision appeared to dissolve, and he sat down again. But the eyes of others followed this vision, surveying the empty spaces of the church and watching the flickering lights of the many lamps and candles.

“There *were* different things,” someone started to say, and then someone else completed the thought: “But they were all spinning and confused, all swirling together.”

“Until all we could see was a great blackness,” said the tall man, gaining his voice again.

A silence now overcame the congregation, and the words they had spoken seemed to be disappearing into this silence, once more drawing the people of Moxton back to the refuge of their former amnesia. But before their minds lost all clarity of recollection a woman named Mrs. Spikes rose to her feet and from the last row of the church, where she sat alone, cried out, “Everything started with him, the one in the McQuister house.”

“How long has it been?” one voice asked.

“Too long,” answered Mrs. Spikes. “I remember him. He's older than I am, but he doesn't look older. And his hair is a strange color.”

“Reddish like pale blood,” said one.

“Green like mold,” said another. “Or yellow and orange like a candle flame.”

“He lived in that house, that same house, a long time ago,” continued Mrs. Spikes. “Before the McQuisters. He lived with his father. But I can only remember the stories. I didn't see anything myself. Something happened one night. Something happened to the whole town. Their name was Maness.”

“That is the name of the man who built this church,” said the tall man. “He was the first clergyman this town had seen. And there were no others after him. What happened, Mrs. Spikes?”

“It was too long ago for anyone to remember. I only know the stories. The reverend said things about his son—said the boy was going to do something and how people had to keep it from happening.”

“What happened, Mrs. Spikes? Try to remember.”

“I'm trying. It was only yesterday that I started to remember. It was when we got back to town. I remembered something that the reverend said in the stories about that night.”

“I heard you,” said another woman. “You said, ‘Blessed is the seed that is planted forever in darkness.’”

Mrs. Spikes stared straight ahead and lightly pounded the top of the pew with her right hand, as though she were calling up memories in this manner. Then she said: “That's

what he was supposed to have been saying that night, 'Blessed is the seed that is planted forever in darkness.' And he said that people had to do something, but the stories I heard when I was growing up don't say what he wanted of us. It was about his son. It was something queer, something no one understood. But no one did anything that he wanted them to do. When they took him home, his son wasn't there, and no one saw that young man again. The stories say that the ones who brought the reverend to his house saw things there, but no one could explain what they saw. What everyone did remember was that late the same night the bells started ringing up in the tower of this church. That's where they found the reverend. He'd hanged himself. It wasn't until the McQuisters moved into town that anyone would go near the reverend's house. Then it seemed no one could remember anything about the place."

"Just as we could not remember what happened only yesterday," said the tall man. "Why we came back to this place when it was the last place we wanted to be. The blackness we saw was a blackness no one had ever seen. That blackness which was not a blackness but was all the colors and shapes of things darkening the sky."

"A vision!" said one old man who for many years had been the proprietor of McQuister's Pharmacy.

"Perhaps only that," replied the tall man.

"No," said Mrs. Spikes. "It was something *he* did. It was like everything else that's been happening since he came here and stayed so long. All the little changes in things that kept getting worse. It's something that's been moving in like a storm. People have seen that it's in the town now, hanging

over that house of his. And the changes in things are worse than ever. Pretty soon it's us that'll be changing."

Then there arose a chorus of voices among the congregation, all of them composing a conflict between "we must do something" and "what can be done?"

While the people of Moxton murmured and fretted in the light of lamps and candles, there was a gradual darkening outside the windows of the church. An unnatural blackness was overtaking the gray afternoon. And the words of these people also began to change, just as so many things had changed in that town. Within the same voices there mingled both keening outcries of fear and a low, muttering invocation. Soon the higher pitched notes in these voices diminished and then wholly disappeared as the deeper tones of incantation prevailed. Now they were all chanting a single word in hypnotic harmony: *Tsalal*, *Tsalal*, *Tsalal*. And standing at the pulpit was the one who was leading the chant, the man whose strangely shaded hair shone in the light of candles and oil lamps. At last he had come from his house where he had stayed too long. The bell in the tower began to ring, sounding in shattered echoes. The resonant cacophony of voices swelled within the church. For these were the voices of people who had lived so long in the wrong place. These were people of a skeleton town.

The figure at the pulpit lifted up his hands before his congregation, and they grew quiet. When he focused his eyes on an old woman sitting alone in the last row, she rose from her seat and walked to the double doors at the rear of the church. The man at the pulpit spread his arms wider, and the old woman pushed back each of the doors.

Through the open doorway was the main street of Moxton, but it was not as it had been. An encompassing blackness had descended and only the lights of the town could be seen. But these lights were now as endless as the blackness itself. The rows of yellowish streetlamps extended to infinity along an avenue of the abyss. Fragments of neon signs were visible, the vibrant magenta letters of the movie theater recurring again and again, as though reflected in a multitude of black mirrors. In the midst of the other lights hovered an endless succession of traffic signals that filled the blackness like multi-colored stars. All these bright remnants of the town, its broken pieces in transformation, were becoming increasingly dim and distorted, bleeding their radiance into the blackness that was consuming them, even as it freakishly multiplied the shattered images of the world, collecting them within its kaleidoscope of colors so dense and so varied that they lost themselves within a black unity.

The man who had built the church in which the people of Moxton were gathered had spoken of the ultimate point. This was now imminent. And as the moment approached, the gathering within the church moved toward the figure at the pulpit, who descended to meet them. They were far beyond their old fears, these skeleton people. They had attained the stripped bone of being, the last layer of an existence without name or description, without nature or essence: the void of the blackness no one had ever seen... or would ever see. For no one had ever lived except as a shadow of the blackness of the Tsalal.

And their eyes looked to the one who was the incarnation of the blackness, and who had come to them to seal his bond with that other one. They looked to him for some word or

gesture in order to bring to fulfillment that day which had turned into night. They looked to him for the thing that would bind them to the blackness and join them within the apocalypse of the unreal.

Finally, as if guided by some whim of the moment, he told them how to do what must be done.

10

What is remembered

The story that circulated in later years among the people of Moxton told how everyone had gathered in the church one afternoon during a big storm that lasted into the night. Unused for decades before this event, the church was strongly constructed and proved a suitable shelter. There were some who recalled that for weeks prior to this cataclysm a variety of uncommon effects had resulted from what they described as a season of strange weather in the vicinity of the town.

The details of this period remain unclear, as do memories of a man who briefly occupied the old McQuister place around the time of the storm. No one had ever spoken with him except Mrs. Spikes, who barely recollected their conversation and who died of cancer not long after the biggest storm of the year. The house in which the man had lived was previously owned by relatives of Ray Starns, but the Starns people were no longer residents of Moxton. In any case, the old McQuister place was not the only untenanted house in the skeleton town, and there was no reason for people to concern themselves with it. Nor did anyone in Moxton give serious thought to the church once the storm had passed.

The doors were once again secured against intruders, but no one ever tested these old locks which had been first put in place after the Reverend Maness hanged himself in the church tower.

Had the people of the town of Moxton ventured beyond the doors of the church they might have found what they left behind following the abatement of the storm. Lying twisted at the foot of the pulpit was the skeleton of a man whose name no one would have been able to remember. The bones were bare but many were broken one from the other, each with the indented marks of the teeth that had gnawed upon them. Yet no scrap of their flesh could be discovered either in the church or anywhere else in the town. Because the flesh was that of one who had stayed too long in a certain place. It was the seed, and now it had been planted in a dark place where it would not grow. They had buried his flesh deep in the barren ground of their meager bodies. Only a few strands of hair of an unusual color lay scattered upon the floor, mingling with the dust of the church.

The Tsalal (1994 Noctuary Version)

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1—Moxton's leavetaking

None of them could say how it was they had returned to the skeleton town. Some had reached the central cross streets, where a single traffic light, long dead, hung down like a dark lantern. There they paused and stood dumbstruck, scarecrows standing out of place, their clothes lying loose and worn about scrawny bodies. Others slowly joined them, drifting in from the outskirts or disembarking from vehicles weighted down with transportable possessions. Then all of them gathered silently together on that vast, gray afternoon.

They seemed too exhausted to speak and for some time appeared not to recognize their location among the surrounding forms and spaces. Their eyes were fixed with an insomniac's stare, the stigma of both monumental fatigue and painful attentiveness to everything in sight. Their faces were narrow and ashen, a few specks mingling with the dusty surface of that day and seeking to hide themselves within its pale hours. Opposing them was the place they had abandoned and to which they had somehow returned. Only one had not gone with them. He had stayed in the skeleton town, and now they had come back to it, though none of them could say how or why this had happened.

A tall, bearded man who wore a flat-brimmed hat looked up at the sky. Within the clouds was a great seeping darkness, the overflow of the coming night and of a blackness no one had ever seen. After a moment the man said, “It will be dark soon.” His words were almost whispered and the effort of speaking appeared to take the last of his strength. But it was not simply a depleted vigor that kept him and the others from turning about and making a second exodus from the town.

No one could say how far they had gone before they reversed their course and turned back toward the place which they believed themselves to have abandoned forever. They could not remember what juncture or dead end they had reached that aborted the evacuation. Part of that day was lost to them, certain images and experiences hidden away. They could feel these things closeted somewhere in their minds, even if they could not call them to memory. They were sure they had seen something they should not remember. And so no one suggested that they set out again on the road that would take them from the town. Yet they could not accept staying in that place.

A paralysis had seized them, that state of soul known to those who dwell on the highest plane of madness, aristocrats of insanity whose nightmares confront them on either side of sleep. Soon enough the wrenching effect of this psychic immobility became far less tolerable than the prospect of simply giving up and staying in the town. Such was the case with at least one of these cataleptic puppets, a sticklike woman who said, “We have no choice. He has stayed in his house.” Then another voice among them shouted, “He has stayed too long.”

A sudden wind moved through the streets, flapping the garments of the weary homecomers and swinging the traffic light that hung over their heads. For a moment all the signals lit up in every direction, disturbing the deep gray twilight. The colors drenched the bricks of buildings and reflected in windows with a strange intensity. Then the traffic light was dark once more, its fit of transformation done.

The man wearing a flat-brimmed hat spoke again, straining his whispery voice. “We must meet together after we have rested.”

As the crowd of thin bodies sluggishly dispersed there was almost nothing spoken among them. An old woman shuffling along the sidewalk did not address anyone in particular when she said, “Blessed is the seed that is planted forever in darkness.”

Someone who had heard these words looked at the old woman and asked, “Missus, what did you say?” But the old woman appeared genuinely confused to learn she had said anything at all.

2—The one who stayed behind

In the house where a man named Ray Starns and a succession of others before him once resided, Andrew Maness ascended the stairway leading to the uppermost floor, and there entered a small room that he had converted to a study and a chamber of meditation. The window in this room looked out over the rooftops in the neighborhood to offer a fair view of Moxton's main street. He watched as everyone abandoned the town, and he watched them when they returned. Now far into the night, he was still watching after they had all retreated to their homes. And every one of these

homes was brightly illuminated throughout the night, while Main Street was in darkness. Even the traffic light was extinguished.

He looked away from the window and fixed his eyes on a large book that lay open on his desk a few steps across the room. The pages of the book were brown and brittle as fallen leaves. “Your wild words were true,” he said to the book. “My friends did not go far before they were sent trudging back. You know what made them come home, but I can only guess.

So many things you have devoutly embellished, yet you offer nothing on this point. As you say, The last vision dies with him who beholds it. Blessed is the seed that is planted forever in darkness.’ But the seed that has been planted still grows.” Andrew Maness closed the book. Written in dark ink upon its cover was the word TSALAL.

3—The power of a place

Before long everyone in Moxton had shut themselves in their houses, and the streets at the center of town were deserted. A few streetlights shone on the dull façades of buildings: small shops, a modest restaurant, a church of indefinite denomination, and even a movie theater, which no one had patronized for some weeks. Surrounding this area were clusters of houses that in the usual manner collect about the periphery of skeleton towns. These were structures of serene desolation that had settled into the orbit of a dead star. They were simple pinewood coffins, full of stillness, leaning upright against a silent sky. Yet it was this silence that allowed sounds from a fantastic distance to be carried into it. And the stillness of these houses and their nar-

row streets led the eye to places astonishingly remote. There were even moments when the entire veil of desolate serenity began to tremble with the tumbling colors of chaos.

Everything seems so unusual in the plainness of these neighborhoods that clutter the margins of a skeleton town. Often no mention is made of the peculiar virtues of such places by their residents. Even so, there may be a house that does not stand along one of those narrow streets but at its end. This house may even be somewhat different from the others in the neighborhood. Possibly it is taller than the other houses or displays a weathervane that spins in the wind of storms. Perhaps its sole distinguishing quality is that it has been long unoccupied, making it available as an empty vessel in which much of that magical desolation of narrow streets and coffin-shaped houses comes to settle and distill like an essence of the old alchemists. It seems part of a design—some great inevitability—that this house should exist among the other houses that clutch at the edges of a skeleton town. And the sense of this vast, all-encompassing design in fact arises within the spindly residents of the area when one day, unexpectedly, there arrives a red-headed man with the key to this particular house.

4—Memories of a Moxton childhood

Andrew Maness closed the book named TSALAL. His eyes then looked around the room, which had not seemed so small to him in the days when he and his father occupied the house, days too long ago for anyone else to recall with clarity. He alone was able to review those times with a sure memory, and he summoned the image of a small bed in the far corner of the room.

As a child he would lie awake deep into the night, his eyes wandering about the moonlit room that seemed so great to his doll-like self. How the shadows enlarged that room, opening certain sections of it to the black abyss beyond the house and beyond the blackness of night, reaching into a blackness no one had ever seen. During these moments things seemed to be changing all around him, and it felt as if he had something to do with this changing. The shadows on the pale walls began to curl about like smoke, creating a swirling murkiness that at times approached sensible shapes —the imperfect zoology of cloud-forms—but soon drifted into hazy nonsense. Smoky shadows gathered everywhere in the room.

It appeared to him that he could see what was making these shadows which moved so slowly and smoothly. He could see that simple objects around him were changing their shapes and making strange shadows. In the moonlight he could see the candle in its tarnished holder resting on the bedstand. The candle had burned quite low when he blew out its flame hours before. Now it was shooting upwards like a flower growing too fast, and it sprouted outward with tallowy vines and blossoms, waxy wings and limbs, pale hands with wriggling fingers and other parts he could not name. When he looked across the room he saw that something was moving back and forth upon the windowsill with a staggered motion. This was a wooden soldier which suddenly stretched out the claws of a crab and began clicking them against the windowpanes. Other things that he could barely see were also changing in the room; he saw shadows twisting about in strange ways. Everything was changing, and he knew that he was doing something to make things change.

But this time he could not stop the changes. It seemed the end of everything, the infernal apocalypse...

Only when he felt his father shaking him did he become aware that he had been screaming. Soon he grew quiet. The candle on his bedstand now burned brightly and was not as it had been a few moments before. He quickly surveyed the room to verify that nothing else remained changed. The wooden soldier was lying on the floor, and its two arms were fixed by its sides.

He looked at his father, who was sitting on the bed and still had on the same dark clothes he had worn when he held church services earlier that day. Sometimes he would see his father asleep in one of the chairs in the parlor or nodding at his desk where he was working on his next sermon. But he had never known his father to sleep during the night.

The Reverend Maness spoke his son's name, and the younger Andrew Maness focused on his father's narrow face, recognizing the crown of white hair, which yet retained a hint of red, and the oval-shaped spectacles reflecting the candle flame. The old man whispered to the boy, as if they were not alone in the house or were engaged in some conspiracy.

“Has it happened again, Andrew?” he asked.

“I did not want to make it happen,” Andrew protested. “I was not by myself.”

The Reverend Maness held up an open hand of silence and understanding. The glare of the candlelight on his spectacles concealed his eyes, which now turned toward the window beside his son's bed. “The mystery of lawlessness doth already work,” he said.

“The Epistles,” Andrew swiftly responded, as if the quote had been a question.

“Can you finish the passage?”

“Yes, I think I can,” answered Andrew, who then assumed a solemn voice and recited: “Now there is one that restraineth, until he be taken out of the way; and then shall be revealed the lawless one, whom the Lord will slay and bring to nought.”

“You know it well, that book.”

“The Holy Bible,” said Andrew, for it sounded strange to him not to name the book in the proper way.

“Yes, the Holy Bible. You should know its words better than you know anything else on earth. You should always have its words in mind like a magical formula.”

“I do, Father. You have always told me that I should.”

The Reverend Maness suddenly stood up from the bed and towering over his son shouted: “Liar! You did not have the words in your mind on this night. You could not have. You allowed the lawless one to do its work. You are the lawless one, but you must not be. You must become the other one, the katechon, the one who restrains.”

“I'm sorry, Father,” Andrew cried out. “Please don't be angry with me.”

The Reverend Maness recovered his temper and again held up his open hand, the fingers of which interlocked and separated several times in what appeared to be a deliberate sequence of subtle gesticulations. He turned away from his son and slowly walked the length of the room. When he reached the window on the opposite side he stared out at the blackness that covered the town of Moxton, where he and his son had first arrived some years before. On the main

street of the town the reverend had built a church; nearby, he had built a house. The silhouette of the church bell-tower was outlined against moonlit clouds. From across the room the Reverend Maness said to his son, “I built the church in town so that it would be seen. I made the church of brick so that it would endure.”

Now he paced the floor in an attitude of meditation while his son looked on in silence. After some time he stood at the foot of his son's bed, glaring down as though he stood at the pulpit of his church. “In the Bible there is a beast,” he said. “You know this, Andrew. But did you know that the beast is also within you? It lives in a place that can never see light. Yes, it is housed here, inside the skull, the habitation of the Great Beast. It is a thing so wonderful in form that its existence might be attributed to the fantastic conjurings of a sorcerer or to a visitation from a far, dark place which no one has ever seen. It is a nightmare that would stop our hearts should we ever behold it gleaming in some shadowy corner of our home, or should we ever—by terrible mischance—lay our hands upon the slime of its flesh. This must never happen, the beast must be kept within its lair. But the beast is a great power that reaches out into the world, a great maker of worlds that are as nothing we can know. And it may work changes on this world. Darkness and light, shape and color, the heavens and the earth—all may be changed by the beast, the great reviser of things seen and unseen, known and unknown. For all that we see and know are but empty vessels in which the beast shall pour a new tincture, therewith changing the aspect of the land, altering the shadows themselves, giving a strange color to our days and our nights, making the day into night, so that we dream while awake

and can never sleep again. There is nothing more awful and nothing more sinful than such changes in things. Nothing is more grotesque than these changes. All changes in things are grotesque. The very possibility of changes in things is grotesque. And the beast is the author of all changes. You must never again consort with the beast!"

"Don't say that, Father!" Andrew screamed, the palms of his hands pressed to his ears in order to obstruct further words of judgment. Yet he heard them all the same.

"You are repentant, but still you do not read the book."

"I do read the book."

"But you do not have the words of the book always in your mind, because you are always reading other books that are forbidden to you. I have seen you looking at my books, and I know that you take them from my shelves like a thief. Those are books that should not be read."

"Then why do you keep them?" Andrew shouted back, knowing that it was evil to question his father and feeling a great joy in having done so. The Reverend Maness stepped around to the side of the bed, his spectacles flashing in the candlelight.

"I keep them," he said, "so that you may learn by your own will to renounce what is forbidden in whatever shape it may appear."

But how wonderful he found those books that were forbidden to him. He remembered seeing them for the first time cloistered on high shelves in his father's library, that small and windowless room at the very heart of the house the Reverend Maness had built. Andrew knew these books on sight, not only by the titles which had such words in them as Mystery, Haunted, Secret, and Shadow, but also by

the characters that formed these words—a jagged script closely resembling the letters of his own Bible—and by the shades of their cloth bindings, the faded vestments of autumn twilights. He somehow knew these books were forbidden to him, even before the reverend had made this fact explicit to his son and caused the boy to feel ashamed of his desire to hold these books and to know their matter. He became bound to the worlds he imagined were revealed in the books, obsessed with what he conceived to be a cosmology of nightmares. And after he had wrongfully admitted himself to his father's library, he began to plot in detail the map of a mysterious universe—a place where the sun had passed from view, where towns were cold and dark, where mountains trembled with the monstrosities they concealed, woods rattled with secret winds, and all the seas were horribly calm. In his dreams of this universe, which far surpassed the darkest visions of any of the books he had read, a neverending night had fallen upon every imaginable landscape.

In sleep he might thus find himself standing at the rim of a great gorge filled with pointed evergreens, and in the distance were the peaks of hills appearing in black silhouette under a sky chaotic with stars. Sublime scenery of this type often recurred in those books forbidden to him, sometimes providing the subject for one of the engraved illustrations accompanying a narrative. But he had never read in any book what his dream showed him in the sky above the gorge and above the hills. For each of the bright, bristling stars would begin to loosen in the places where the blackness held them. They wobbled at first, and then they rolled over in their bed of night. Now it was the other side of the stars that he saw, which was unlike anything ever displayed to the eyes

of the earth. What he could see resembled not stars but something more like the underside of large stones one might overturn deep in damp woods. They had changed in the strangest way, changed because everything in the universe was changing and could no longer be protected from the changes being worked upon them by something that had been awakened in the blackness, something that desired to remold everything it could see... and had the power to see all things. Now the faces of the stars were crawling with things that made them gleam in a way that stars had never gleamed before. And then these things he saw in his dream began to drip from the stars toward the earth, streaking the night with their gleaming trails.

In those nights of dreaming, all things were subject to forces that knew nothing of law or reason, and nothing possessed its own nature or essence but was only a mask upon the face of absolute darkness, a blackness no one had ever seen.

Even as a child he realized that his dreams did not follow the creation taught to him by his father and by that book. It was another creation he pursued, a counter-creation, and the books on the shelves of his father's library could not reveal to him what he desired to know of this other genesis. While denying it to his father, and often to himself, he dreamed of reading the book that was truly forbidden, the scripture of a deadly creation, one that would tell the tale of the universe in its purest sense.

But where could he find such a book? On what shelf of what library would it appear before his eyes? Would he recognize it when fortune allowed it to fall into his hands? Over time he became certain he would know the book, so of-

ten did he dream of it. For in the most unlikely visions he found himself in possession of the book, as though it belonged to him as a legacy. But while he held the book in dreams, and even saw its words with miraculous clarity, he could not comprehend the substance of a script whose meaning seemed to dissolve into nonsense. Never was he granted in these dreams an understanding of what the book had to tell him. Only as the most obscure and strangest sensations did it communicate with his mind, only as a kind of presence that invaded and possessed his sleep. On waking, all that remained was a euphoric terror. And it was then that objects around him would begin their transformations, for his soul had been made lawless by dreams and his mind was filled with the words of the wrong book.

5—The author of the book

"You knew it was hopeless," said Andrew Maness as he stood over the book that lay on the desk, glaring at the pages of old handwriting in black ink. "You told me to always read the right words and to always have them in my mind, but you knew I would read the wrong words. You knew what I was. You knew that such a being existed only to read the wrong words and to want to see those words written across the sky in a black script. Because you yourself were the author of the book. And you brought your son to the place where he would read your words. This town was the wrong place, and you knew it was the wrong place. But you told yourself it was the only place where what you had done… might be undone. Because you became afraid of what you and those others had done. For years you were intrigued by the greatest madness, the most atrocious secrets and

schemes, and then you became afraid. What did you discover that could make you so afraid, you and the others who were always intrigued by the monstrous things you told of, that you sang of, in the book? You preached to me that all change is grotesque, that the very possibility of change is evil. Yet in the book you declare 'transformation as the only truth'—the only truth of the Tsalal, that one who is without law or reason. 'There is no nature to things you wrote in the book. 'There are no faces except masks held tight against the pitching chaos behind them.' You wrote that there is not true growth or evolution in the life of this world but only transformations of appearance, an incessant melting and molding of surfaces without underlying essence. Above all you pronounced that there is no salvation of any being because no beings exist as such, nothing exists to be saved—everything, everyone exists only to be drawn into the slow and endless swirling of mutations that we may see every second of our lives if we simply gaze through the eyes of the Tsalal.

"Yet these truths of yours that you kept writing in your book cannot be the reason you became afraid, for even while your voice is somber or trembling to speak of these things, your phrases are burdened with fascination and you are always marvelling at the grand mockery of the universal masquerade, the 'hallucination of lies that obscures the vision of all but the elect of the Tsalal.' It is something of which you will not speak or cannot speak that caused you to become afraid. What did you discover that you could not face without renouncing what you and those others had done, without running to this town to hide yourself in the doctrines of a church that you did not truly uphold? Did this knowledge, this discovery remain within you, at once alive

and annihilated to your memory? Was it this that allowed you to prophesy that the people of Moxton would return to their town, yet prevented you from telling what phenomenon could be more terrible than the nightmare they had fled, those grotesque changes which had overtaken the streets and houses of this place?

“You knew this was the wrong place when you brought me here as a child. And I knew that this was the wrong place when I came home to this town and stayed here until everyone knew that I had stayed too long in this place.”

6—The white-haired woman

Not long after Andrew Maness moved back to the town of Moxton, an old woman came up to him late one afternoon on the street. He was staring into the window of a repair shop that closed early. Corroded pieces of machinery were strewn before him, as if on display: the guts and bones of a defunct motor of some kind. His reverie was disturbed when the old woman said, “I've seen you before.”

“That is possible, ma'am,” he replied. “I moved into a house on Oakman a few weeks ago.”

“No, I mean that I've seen you before that.”

He smiled very slightly at the old woman and said, “I lived here for a time, but I didn't think anyone would remember.”

“I remember the hair. It's red but kind of greenish too, yellow maybe.”

“Discolored through the years,” he explained.

“I remember it the way it was. And it's not much different now. My hair's white as salt.”

“Yes, ma'am,” he said.

“I told those damn fools I remembered. No one listens to me. What's your name?”

“My name, Mrs…”

“Spikes,” she snapped.

“My name, Mrs Spikes, is Andrew Maness.”

“Maness, Maness,” she chanted to herself. “No, I don't think I know Maness. You're in the Starns house.”

“It was in fact purchased from one of Mr Starns’ family who inherited the house after he died.”

“Used to be the Waterses lived there. Before them the Wellses. And before them the McQuisters. But that's getting to be before my time. Before the McQuisters is just too damn long to remember. Too damn long.” She was repeating these words as she charged off down the street. Andrew Maness watched her thin form and salt-white hair recede and lose all color in the drab surroundings of the skeleton town.

7—Revelations of a unique being

For Andrew Maness, the world had always been divided into two separate realms defined by what he could only describe as a prejudice of soul. Accordingly he was provided with a dual set of responses that he would have to a given locale, so that he would know if it was a place that was right for him, or one that was wrong. In places of the former type there was a separation between his self and the world around him, an enveloping absence. These were the great empty spaces which comprised nearly the whole of the world. There was no threat presented by such places. But there were other places where it seemed a presence of some dreadful kind was allowed to enter, a force that did not belong to these places yet moved freely within them… and

within him. It was precisely such places as this, and the presence within them, which came to preside over his life and determine its course. He had no choice, for this was the scheme of the elect persons who had generated him, and he was compelled to fall in with their design. He was in fact the very substance of their design.

His father knew that there were certain places in the world to which he must respond, even in his childhood, and which would cause him to undergo a second birth under the sign of the Tsalal. The Reverend Maness knew that the town of Moxton was among such places—outposts on the desolate borderlands of the real. He said that he had brought his son to this town so that the boy would learn to resist the presence he would feel here and elsewhere in the world. He said that he had brought his son to the right place, but he had in fact brought him to a place that was entirely wrong for the being that he was. And he said that his son should always fill his mind with the words of that book. But these words were easily silenced and usurped by those other words in those other books. His father seemed to entice him into reading the very books he should not have read. Soon these books provoked in Andrew Maness the sense of that power and that presence which may manifest itself in a place such as the town of Moxton. And there were other places where he felt that same presence. Following intuitions that grew stronger as he grew older, Andrew Maness would find such places by hazard or design.

Perhaps he would come upon an abandoned house standing shattered and bent in an isolated landscape—a raw skeleton in a boneyard. But this dilapidated structure would seem to him a temple, a wayside shrine to that dark presence

with which he sought union, and also a doorway to the dark world in which it dwelled. Nothing can convey those sensations, the countless nuances of trembling excitement, as he approached such a decomposed edifice whose skewed and ragged outline suggested another order of existence, the truest order of existence, as though such places as this house were only wavering shadows cast down to earth by a distant, unseen realm of entity. There he would experience the touch of something outside himself, something whose will was confused with his own, as in a dream wherein one feels possessed of a fantastic power to determine what events will transpire and yet also feels helpless to control that power, which, through oneself, may produce the chaos of nightmare. This mingling of mastery and helplessness overwhelmed him with a black intoxication and suggested his life's goal: to work the great wheel that turns in darkness, and to be broken upon it.

Yet Andrew Maness had always known that his ambition was an echo of that conceived by his father many years before, and that the pursuit of this ambition had been consummated in his own birth.

8—Not much more than a century ago

"As a young man," the Reverend Maness explained to his son, who was now a young man himself, "I thought myself an adept in the magic of the old gods, a communicant of entities both demonic and divine. I did not comprehend for years that I was merely a curator in the museum where the old gods were on display, their replicas and corpses set up in the countless galleries of the invisible… and now the extinct. I knew that in past millennia these beings had always re-

placed one another as each of them passed away along with the worlds that worshipped them. This mirror-like succession of supreme monarchs may still seem eternal to those who have not sensed the great shadow which has always been positioned behind every deity or pantheon. Yet I was able to sense this shadow and see that it had eclipsed the old gods without in any way being one of their kind. For it was even older than they, the dark background against which they had forever carried on their escapades as best they could. But its emergence into the foreground of things was something new, an advent occurring not much more than a century ago. Perhaps this great blackness, this shadow, has always prevailed on worlds other than our own, places that have never known the gods of order, the gods of design. Even this world had long prepared for it, creating certain places where the illusion of a reality was worn quite thin and where the gods of order and design could barely breathe. Such places as this town of Moxton became fertile ground for this blackness no one had ever seen.

"Yes, it was not much more than a century ago that the people of this world betrayed their awareness of a new god that was not a god. Such an awareness may never be complete, never reach a true agony of illumination, except among an elect. I myself was slow in coming to it. The authenticity of my enlightenment may seem questionable and arbitrary, considering its source. Nonetheless, there is a tradition of revelation, an ancient protocol, by which knowledge of the unseen is delivered to us through inspired texts. And it is by means of these scriptures dictated from beyond that we of this world may discover what we have not and cannot experience in a direct confrontation. So it was with

the Tsalal. But the book that I have written, and which I have named Tsalal, is not the revealed codex of which I am, speaking. It is only a reflection, or rather a distillation, of those other writings in which I first detected the existence, the emergence, of the Tsalal itself.

"Of course, there have always been writings of a certain kind, a primeval lore which provided allusions to the darkness of creation and to monstrosities of every type, human and inhuman, as if there were a difference. Something profoundly dark and grotesque has always had a life in every language of this world, appearing at intervals and throwing its shadow for a moment upon stories that try to make sense of things, often confounding the most happy tale. And this shadow is never banished in any of these stories, however we may pretend otherwise. The darkness of the grotesque is an immortal enigma: in all the legends of the dead, in all the tales of creatures of the night, in all the mythologies of mad gods and lucid demons, there remains a kind of mocking nonsense to the end, a thick and resonant voice which calls out from the heart of these stories and declares: 'Still I am here.' And the idiot laughter of that voice—how it sounds through the ages! This laughter often reaches our ears through certain stories wherein this grotesque spirit itself has had a hand. However we have tried to ignore the laughter of this voice, however we have tried to overwhelm its words and protect ourselves by always keeping other words in our minds, it still sounds throughout the world.

"But it was not much more than a century ago that this laughter began to rise to a pitch. You have heard it yourself, Andrew, as you furtively made incursions into my library during your younger days, revelling in a Gothic feast of the

grotesque. These books do not hold an arcane knowledge intended for the select few but were written for a world which had begun to slight the gods of order and design, to question their very existence and to exalt in the disorders of the grotesque. Both of us have now studied the books in which the Tsalal was being gradually revealed as the very nucleus of our universe, even if their authors remained innocent of the revelations they were perpetrating. It was from one of the most enlightened of this sect of Gothic storytellers that I took the name of that one. You recall, Andrew, the adventures of an Arthur Pym in a fantastic land where everything, people and landscape alike, is of a perfect blackness—the Antarctic country of Tsalal. This was among the finest evocations I had discovered of that blackness no one had ever seen, a literary unveiling of being without soul or substance, without meaning or necessity—not a universe of design and order but one whose sole principle was that of senseless transmutation. A universe of the grotesque. And from that moment it became my ambition to invoke what I now called the Tsalal, and ultimately to effect a worldly incarnation of the thing itself.

"Through the years I found there were others who had become entranced with an ambition so near to my own that we formed a league... the elect of the Tsalal. They too had been adepts of the old gods who had been made impotent or extinct by the emergence of that one, an inevitable advent which we were avid to hasten and lose ourselves in. For we had recognized the mask of our identities, and our only consolation for what we had lost, a perverse salvation, was to embrace the fatality of the Tsalal. Vital to this end was a woman upon whom was performed a ceremony of conception.

And it was during these rites that we first came into the most intimate communion with that one, which moved within us all and worked the most wonderful changes upon so many things.

“None of us suspected how it would be when we gathered that last night. This all happened in another country, an older country. But it was nevertheless a place like this town of Moxton, a place where the appearances of this world seem to waver at times, hovering before one's eyes as a mere fog.

This place was known among our circle as the Street of Lamps, which was the very heart of a district under the sign of the Tsalal. In recollection, the lamps seem only a quirk of scene, an accident of atmosphere, but at the time they were to us the eyes of the Tsalal itself. These sidewalk fixtures of radiant glass upheld by dark metal stems formed a dream-like procession up and down the street, a spectacle of infinite pathos and mystery. One poet of the era called them ‘iron lilies,’ and another compared their jewel-like illumination to the yellow topaz. In a different language, and a different city, these devices—les reverberes, les becs de gaz—were also celebrated, an enigmatic sign of a century, a world, that was guttering out.

“It was in this street that we prepared a room for your birth and your nurturing under the sign of the Tsalal. There were few other residents in this ramshackle area, and they abandoned it some time before you were born, frightened off by changes that all of us could see taking place in the Street of Lamps. At first the changes were slight: spiders had begun laying webs upon the stones of the street and thin strands of smoke spun out from chimney stacks, tangling together in the sky. When the night of your birth arrived the changes

became more intense. They were focused on the room in which we gathered to chant the invocation to the Tsalal. We incanted throughout the night, standing in a circle around the woman who had been the object of the ceremony of conception. Did I mention that she was not one of us? No, she was a gaunt denizen of the Street of Lamps whose body we appropriated some months before, an honorary member of our sect whom we treated very well during her term of captivity. As the moment of your birth drew closer she lay upon the floor of the ceremonial room and began screaming in many different voices. We did not expect her to survive the ordeal. Neither did we expect the immediate consequences of the incarnation we attempted to effect, the consummation of a bond between this woman and the Tsalal.

"We were inviting chaos into the world, we knew this. We had been intoxicated by the prospect of an absolute disorder.

With a sense of grim exaltation we greeted the intimations of a universal nightmare—the ultimate point of things. But on that night, even as we invoked the Tsalal within that room, we came to experience a realm of the unreal hitherto unknown to us. And we discovered that it had never been our desire to lose ourselves in the unreal, not in the manner which threatened us in the Street of Lamps. For as you, Andrew, began to enter the world through this woman, so was the Tsalal also entering the world through this woman. She was now the seed of that one, her flesh radiant and swelling in the fertile ground of the unreal which was the Street of Lamps. We looked beyond the windows of that room, already contemplating our escape. But then we saw that there was no longer any street, nor any buildings along that

street. All that remained were the streetlamps with their harsh yellow glow like rotten stars, endless rows of streetlamps that ascended into the all-encompassing blackness. Can you imagine: endless rows of streetlamps ascending into the blackness. Everything that sustained the reality of the world around us had been drained away. We noticed how our own bodies had become suddenly drawn and meager, while the body of that woman, the seed of the coming apocalypse, was becoming ever more swollen with the power and magic of the Tsalal. And we knew at that moment what needed to be done if we were ever to escape the unreality that had been sown in that place called the Street of Lamps."

9—A skeleton town

Even in the time of the McQuisters, which almost no one could remember very well, Moxton was a skeleton town. No building there had ever seemed new. Every crudded brick or faded board, every crusted shingle or frayed awning appeared to be handed down from the demise of another structure in another town, cast-offs of a thriving center that had no use for worn out materials. The front windows of stores were cloudy with a confusion of reflected images from someplace else. Entire establishments might have been dumped off in Moxton, where buildings stood along the street like odd objects forgotten on a cellar shelf.

It was less a real town than the semblance of a town, a pasteboard backdrop to an old stage show, its outlines crudely stroked with an antique paintbrush unconcerned with the details of character and identity, lettering the names of streets and shops with senseless scribbles no one was ever meant to read. Everything that might have been

real about the town had somehow become thwarted. Nothing flourished there, nothing made a difference by its presence or absence.

No business could do more than anonymously survive in Moxton. Even larger enterprises such as a dimestore or a comfortable hotel could not assert themselves but were forced to assume the same air of unreality possessed by lesser establishments: the shoe store whose tiny front window displayed merchandise long out of style, the clothes store where dust collected in the folds of garments worn by headless mannikins, the repair shop at which a good number of the items brought in were left unclaimed and lay corroding in every cranny of the place.

Many years ago a movie theater opened on the prominent corner of Webster and Main, decades before a traffic light had been hung over the intersection of these streets. A large neon sign with letters stacked in a vertical file spelled out the word RIVIERA. For a moment this word appeared in searing magenta against the Moxton twilight, calling up and down the street to everyone in the town. But by nightfall the glowing letters had been subdued, their glamor suffocating in a rarefied atmosphere where sights and sounds were drained of reality. The new movie theater now burned no more brightly than McQuister's Pharmacy across the street. Both of them were allotted a steady and modest patronage in a skeleton town that was no more enchanted with the one than the other.

Thus was the extent of Moxton's compromise with any manifestation of the real. For there are certain places that exist on the wayside of the real: a house, a street, even entire towns which have claims upon them by virtue of some

nameless affinity with the most remote orders of being. They are, these places, fertile ground for the unreal and retain the minimum of immunity against exotic disorders and aberrations. Their concessions to a given fashion of reality are only placating gestures, a way of stilling it through limited acceptance. It was unnecessary, even perverse, to resist construction of the movie theater or the new church (founded in 1893 by the Rev. Andrew Maness). Such an action might imbue these things with an unwarranted measure of substance or power, and in a skeleton town there is little substance, while all power resides only in the unreal. The citizens of such a place are custodians of a rare property, a precious estate whose true owners are momentarily absent. All that remains before full proprietorship of the land may be assumed is the planting of a single seed and its nurturing over a sufficient period of time, an interval that has nothing to do with the hours and days of the world.

10—A plea in the past

As Andrew Maness grew older in the town of Moxton he watched his father submit to the despair and the wonder that he could not unmake the thing that he and those others had incarnated. On several occasions the reverend entered his son's room as the boy slept. With knife and ax and long-handled scythe he attempted to break the growing bond between his son and the Tsalal. In the morning young Andrew's bedroom would reek like a slaughterhouse. But his limbs and organs were again made whole and a new blood flowed within them, proving the reality of what had been brought into the world by his father and those other enthusiasts of that one.

There were times when the Reverend Maness, in a state of awe and desperation, awoke his son from dreams and made his appeal to the boy, informing him that he was reaching a perilous juncture in his development and begging him to submit to a peculiar ritual that would be consummated by Andrew's ruin.

“What ritual is this?” Andrew asked with a novitiate's excitation. But the reverend's powers of speech became paralyzed at this question and many nights would pass before he again broached the subject.

At last the Reverend Maness came into his son's room carrying a book. He opened the book to its final pages and began to read. And the words he read laid out a scheme for his son's destruction. These words were his own, the ultimate chapter in a great work he had composed documenting a wealth of revelations concerning the force or entity called the Tsalal.

Andrew could not take his eyes off the book and strained to hear every resonance of his father's reading from it, even if the ritual the old man spelled out dictated the atrocious manner of Andrew's death—the obliteration of the seed of the apocalypse which was called the Tsalal.

“Your formula for cancelling my existence calls for the participation of others,” Andrew observed. “The elect of... that one.”

“Tsalal,” the Reverend Maness intoned, still captivated by an occult nomenclature.

“Tsalal,” Andrew echoed. “My protector, my guardian of the black void.”

“You are not yet wholly the creature of that one. I have tried to change what I could not. But you have stayed too

long in this place, which was the wrong place for a being such as you. You are undergoing a second birth under the sign of the Tsalal. But there is still enough time if you will submit yourself to the ritual."

"I must ask you, Father: who will carry it out? Will there be a convocation of strangers in this town?"

After a painfully reflective pause, the reverend said: "There are none remaining who will come. They would be required to relive the events following your birth, the first time you were born."

"And my mother?" Andrew asked.

"She did not survive."

"But how did she die?"

"By the ritual," the Reverend Maness confessed. "At the ritual of your birth it became necessary to perform the ritual of death."

"Her death."

"As I told you before. This ritual had never been performed, or even conceived, prior to that night on which you were born. We did not know what to expect. But after a certain point, after seeing certain things, we acted in the correct manner, as if we had always known what needed to be done."

"And what needed to be done, Father?"

"It is all in this book."

"You have the book, but you're still lacking for those others. A congregation, so to speak."

"I have my congregation in this very town. They will do what needs to be done. To this you must submit yourself. To the end of your existence you must consent."

"And if I don't?"

"Soon," the Reverend Maness began, "the bond will be sealed between you and the other, that one which is all nightmare of grotesque metamorphoses behind the dream of earthly forms, that one which is the center of so-called entity and so-called essence. To the living illusions of the world of light will come a blackness no one has ever seen, a dawn of darkness. What you yourself have known of these things is only a passing glimpse, a flickering candleflame beside the conflagration which is to come. You have found yourself fascinated by those moments after you have been asleep, and awake to see how the things around you are affected in their form. You look on as they change in every freakish manner, feeling the power that changes them to be connected to your own being, conveying to you its magic through a delicate cord. Then the cord grows too thin to hold, your mind returns to you, and the little performance you were watching comes to an end. But you have already stayed long enough in this place to have begun a second birth under the sign of the Tsalal. The cord between you and that one is strong. Wherever you go, you will be found. Wherever you stay, there the changes will begin. For you are the seed of that one. You are just as the luz, the bone-seed of rabbinic prophecy: that sliver of every mortal self from which the whole body may be reconstructed and stand for judgement at the end of time. Wherever you stay, there the resurrection will begin. You are a fragment of the one that is without law or reason. The body that will grow out of you is the true body of all things. The changes themselves are the body of the Tsalal. The changes are the truth of all bodies, which we believe have a face and a substance only because we cannot see that they are always changing, that they are only fragile

forms which are forever being shattered in the violent whirlpool of truth.

"This is how it will be for all your days: you will be drawn to a place that reveals the sign of the Tsalal—an aspect of the unreal, a forlorn glamor in things—and with your coming the changes will begin. These may go unnoticed for a time, affecting only very small things or greater things in subtle ways, a disruption of forms that you very well know. But other people will sense that something is wrong in that place, which may be a certain house or street or even an entire town. They will go about with uneasy eyes and become emaciated in their flesh, their very bones growing thin with worry, becoming worn down and warped just as the world around them is slowly stripped of whatever seemed real, leaving them famished for the sustenance of old illusions. Rumors will begin to pass among them about unpleasant things they believe they have seen or felt and yet cannot explain—a confusion among the lower creatures, perhaps, or a stone that seems to throb with a faint life. For these are the modest beginnings of the chaos that will ultimately consume the stars themselves, which may be left to crawl within that great blackness no one has ever seen. And by their proximity to your being they will know that you are the source of these changes, that through your being these changes radiate into the world. The longer you stay in a place, the worse it will become. If you leave such a place in time, then the changes can have no lasting power—the ultimate point will not have been reached, and it will be as the little performances of grotesquerie you have witnessed in your own room."

"And if I do stay in such a place?" asked Andrew.

"Then the changes will proceed toward the ultimate point. So long as you can bear to watch the appearances of things become degraded and confused, so long as you can bear to watch the people in that place wither in their bodies and minds, the changes will proceed toward their ultimate point—the disintegration of all apparent order, the birth of the Tsalal. Before that happens you must submit to the ritual of the ultimate point."

But Andrew Maness only laughed at his father's scheme, and the sound of this laughter almost shattered the reverend entirely. In a deliberately serious voice, Andrew said: "Do you really believe you will gain the participation of others?"

"The people of this town will do the work of the ritual," his father replied. "When they have seen certain things, they will do what must be done. Their hunger to preserve the illusions of their world will surpass their horror at what must be done to save it. But it will be your decision whether or not you will submit to the ritual which will determine the course of so many things in this world."

11—A meeting in Moxton

Everyone in the town gathered in the church that the Reverend Maness had built so many years ago. No others had succeeded the reverend, and no services had been held since the time of his pastorate. The structure had never been outfitted with electricity, but the illumination of numerous candles and oil lamps the congregation had brought supplemented the light of a grayish afternoon that penetrated the two rows of plain, peaked windows along either side of the church. In the corner of one of those windows a spider fumbled about in its web, struggling awkwardly with ap-

pendages that resembled less the nimble legs of the arachnid than they did an octet of limp tentacles. After several thrusts the creature reached the surface of a window pane and passed into the glass itself, where it began to move about freely in its new element.

The people of Moxton had tried to rest themselves before this meeting, but their haggard look spoke of a failure to do so. The entire population of the town barely filled a half dozen pews at the front of the church, although some were collapsed upon the floor and others shuffled restlessly along the center aisle. All of them appeared even more emaciated than the day before, when they had attempted to escape the town and unaccountably found themselves driven back to it.

“Everything has gotten worse since we returned,” said one man, as if to initiate the meeting which had no obvious hope or purpose beyond collecting in a single place the nightmares of the people of Moxton. A murmur of voices rose up and echoed throughout the church. Several people spoke of what they had witnessed the night before, reciting a litany of grotesque phenomena that had prohibited sleep.

There was a bedroom wall which changed colors, turning from its normal rosy tint that was calm and pale in the moonlight to a quivering and luminescent green that rippled like the flesh of a great reptile. There was a little doll whose neck began to elongate until it was writhing through the air like a serpent, while its tiny doll's head whispered words that had no sense in them yet conveyed a profoundly hideous meaning. There were things no one had seen that made noises of a deeply troubling nature in the darkness of cellars or behind the doors of closets and cupboards. And then there was something that people saw when they looked

through the windows of their houses toward the house where a man named Andrew Maness now lived. But when anyone began to describe what it was they saw in the vicinity of that house, which they called the McQuister house, their words became confused. They did see something and yet they saw nothing.

“I also saw what you speak of,” whispered the tall, bearded man who wore a flat-brimmed hat. “It was a blackness, but it was not the blackness of the night or of shadows. It was hovering over the old McQuister place, or around it. This was something I had not seen in Moxton even since the changes.”

“No, not in Moxton, not in the town. But you have seen it before. We have all seen it,” said a man's voice that sounded as if it came from elsewhere in the church.

“Yes,” answered the tall man, as if confessing a thing that had formerly been denied. “But we are not seeing it the way it might be seen, the way we had seen it when we were outside the town, when we tried to leave and could not.”

“That was not blackness we saw then,” said one of the younger women who seemed to be wresting an image from her memory. “It was something... something that wasn't blackness at all.”

“There were different things,” shouted an old man who suddenly stood up from one of the pews, his eyes fixed in a gaze of revelation. A moment later this vision appeared to dissolve, and he sat down again. But the eyes of others followed this vision, surveying the empty spaces of the church and watching the flickering lights of the many lamps and candles.

“There were different things,” someone started to say, and then someone else completed the thought: “But they were all spinning and confused, all swirling together.”

“Until all we could see was a great blackness,” said the tall man, gaining his voice again.

A silence now overcame the congregation, and the words they had spoken seemed to be disappearing into this silence, once more drawing the people of Moxton back to the refuge of their former amnesia. But before their minds lost all clarity of recollection a woman named Mrs Spikes rose to her feet and from the last row of the church, where she sat alone, cried out, “Everything started with him, the one in the McQuister house.”

“How long has it been?” one voice asked.

“Too long,” answered Mrs Spikes. “I remember him. He's older than I am, but he doesn't look older. His hair is a strange color.”

“Reddish like pale blood,” said one.

“Green like mold,” said another. “Or yellow and orange like candleflame.”

“He lived in that house, that same house, a long time ago,” continued Mrs Spikes. “Before the McQuisters. He lived with his father. But I can only remember the stories. I didn't see anything myself. Something happened one night. Something happened to the whole town. Their name was Maness.”

“That is the name of the man who built this church,” said the tall man. “He was the first clergyman this town had seen. And there were no others after him. What happened, Mrs Spikes?”

“It was too long ago for anyone to remember. I only know the stories. The reverend said things about his son, said the boy was going to do something and how people had to keep it from happening.”

“What happened, Mrs Spikes? Try to remember.”

“I'm trying. It was only yesterday that I started to remember. It was when we got back to town. I remembered something that the reverend said in the stories about that night.”

“I heard you,” said another woman. “You said, ‘Blessed is the seed that is planted forever in darkness.’”

Mrs Spikes stared straight ahead and lightly pounded the top of the pew with her right hand, as though she were calling up memories in this manner. Then she said: “That's what he was supposed to have been saying that night, ‘Blessed is the seed that is planted forever in darkness.’ And he said that people had to do something, but the stories I heard when I was growing up don't say what he wanted people to do. It was about his son. It was something queer, something no one understood. But no one did anything that he wanted them to do. When they took him home, his son wasn't there, and no one saw that young man again. The stories say that the ones who brought the reverend to his house saw things there, but no one could explain what they saw. What everyone did remember was that late the same night the bells started ringing up in the tower of this church. That's where they found the reverend. He'd hung himself. It wasn't until the McQuisters moved into town that anyone would go near the reverend's house. Then it seemed no one could remember anything about the place.”

“Just as we could not remember what happened only yesterday,” said the tall man. “Why we came back to this place when it was the last place we wanted to be. The blackness we saw that was a blackness no one had ever seen. That blackness which was not a blackness but was all the colors and shapes of things darkening the sky.”

“A vision!” said one old man who for many years had been the proprietor of McQuister's Pharmacy.

“Perhaps only that,” replied the tall man.

“No,” said Mrs Spikes. “It was something he did. It was like everything else that's been happening since he came here and stayed so long. All the little changes in things that kept getting worse. It's something that's been moving in like a storm. People have seen that it's in the town now, hanging over that house of his. And the changes in things are worse than ever. Pretty soon it's us that'll be changing.”

Then there arose a chorus of voices among the congregation, all of them composing a conflict between “we must do something” and “what can be done?”

While the people of Moxton murmured and fretted in the light of lamps and candles, there was a gradual darkening outside the windows of the church. An unnatural blackness was overtaking the gray afternoon. And the words of these people also began to change, just as so many things had changed in that town. Within the same voices there mingled both keening outcries of fear and a low, muttering invocation. Soon the higher pitched notes in these voices diminished and then wholly disappeared as the deeper tones of incantation prevailed. Now they were all chanting a single word in hypnotic harmony: Tsalal, Tsalal, Tsalal. And standing at the pulpit was the one who was leading the chant, the

man whose strangely shaded hair shone in the light of candles and oil lamps. At last he had come from his house where he had stayed too long. The bell in the tower began to ring, sounding in shattered echoes. The resonant cacophony of voices swelled within the church. For these were the voices of people who had lived so long in the wrong place. These were people of a skeleton town.

The figure at the pulpit lifted up his hands before his congregation, and they grew quiet. When he focused his eyes on an old woman sitting alone in the last row, she rose from her seat and walked to the double doors at the rear of the church. The man at the pulpit spread his arms wider, and the old woman pushed back each of the doors.

Through the open doorway was the main street of Moxton, but it was not as it had been. An encompassing blackness had descended and only the lights of the town could be seen. But these lights were now as endless as the blackness itself. The rows of yellowish streetlamps extended to infinity along an avenue of the abyss. Fragments of neon signs were visible, the vibrant magenta letters of the movie theater recurring again and again, as though reflected in a multitude of black mirrors. In the midst of the other lights hovered an endless succession of traffic signals that filled the blackness like multi-colored stars. All these bright remnants of the town, its broken pieces in transformation, were becoming increasingly dim and distorted, bleeding their radiance into the blackness that was consuming them, even as it freakishly multiplied the shattered images of the world, collecting them within its kaleidoscope of colors so dense and so varied that they lost themselves within a black unity.

The man who had built the church in which the people of Moxton were gathered had spoken of the ultimate point. This was now imminent. And as the moment approached, the gathering within the church moved toward the figure at the pulpit, who descended to meet them. They were far beyond their old fears, these skeleton people. They had attained the stripped bone of being, the last layer of an existence without name or description, without nature or essence: the nothingness of the blackness no one had ever seen… or would ever see. For no one had ever lived except as a shadow of the blackness of the Tsalal.

And their eyes looked to the one who was the incarnation of the blackness, and who had come to them to seal his bond with that other one. They looked to him for some word or gesture in order to bring to fulfilment that day which had turned into night. They looked to him for the thing that would bind them to the blackness and join them within the apocalypse of the unreal.

Finally, as if guided by some whim of the moment, he told them how to do what must be done.

12—What is remembered

The story that circulated in later years among the people of Moxton told how everyone had gathered in the church one afternoon during a big storm that lasted into the night. Unused for decades before this event, the church was strongly constructed and proved a suitable shelter. There were some who recalled that for weeks prior to this cataclysm a variety of uncommon effects had resulted from what they described as a season of strange weather in the vicinity of the town.

The details of this period remain unclear, as do memories of a man who briefly occupied the old McQuister place around the time of the storm. No one had ever spoken with him except Mrs Spikes, who barely recollected their conversation and who died of cancer not long after the biggest storm of the year. The house in which the man had lived was previously owned by relatives of Ray Starns, but the Starns people were no longer residents of Moxton. In any case, the old McQuister place was not the only untenanted house in the skeleton town, and there was no reason for people to concern themselves with it. Nor did anyone in Moxton give serious thought to the church once the storm had passed. The doors were once again secured against intruders, but no one ever tested these old locks which had been first put in place after the Reverend Maness hung himself in the church tower.

Had the people of the town of Moxton ventured beyond the doors of the church they might have found what they left behind following the abatement of the storm. Lying twisted at the foot of the pulpit was the skeleton of a man whose name no one would have been able to remember. The bones were clean. No bit of their flesh could be discovered either in the church or anywhere else in the town. Because the flesh was that of one who had stayed in a certain place too long. It was the seed, and now it had been planted in a dark place where it would not grow. They had buried his flesh deep in the barren ground of their meager bodies. Only a few strands of hair of an unusual color lay scattered upon the floor, mingling with the dust of the church.

We Can Hide From Horror Only In The Heart Of Horror: Notes And Aphorisms (1994 Das Schwarze Geheimnis Version)

First published in *Das Schwarze Geheimnis* #1, Fall 1994

(From notebooks circa 1976-82)

Abstract madness: protagonist who senses that he's insane yet cannot discover the exact nature of his insanity.

Conflict between the fear of death and the nightmare of immortality. Link to 'abstract madness' plot.

Character who is dying yet has no feeling whatever that he is confronting death. Paradoxical horror.

Detective writer who cannot bring himself to use the word 'corpse', replacing it in his fiction with entirely arbitrary terms. Readers amused by this quirk at first but soon begin to perceive more and more words as code words for 'corpse'. - The Literary Career of Ian Corman. -

A world forever reverberant with the horror of all who ever have lived and suffered.

Story in which the fantastic element is treated in an ambiguous way that seems neither to negate nor affirm the fantastic.

The unique way in which a first-person narrator can talk about his dream self.

Man meets vampire in a church. The vampire turns out to be a priest.

Conflict in modern supernatural fiction is not between good and evil in the traditional sense, but between sanity and insanity in both the personal and metaphysical realms.

Taking one's place among the monsters.

Title: ‘The Rash’.

Stage performance that elicits from the audience a very strange sound. Horror of the ludicrous. Backstage: ‘There, do you hear it.’

Someone ends up in a hell where his torment is to be perpetually on the brink of death without ever dying.

The horror of forms merging.

Much of fantastic literature is an exhibition that consists of kaleidoscopically manipulating concepts into patterns which are new and perhaps a little strange, yet which lack any particular emotional or visionary foundation. True strangeness is a perspective, not a sequence of events.

Eternal cosmic vertigo.

Opening scene of a story: priest in bar ordering large quantities of alcohol.

Atmosphere in a horror story is supplied by narrative and descriptive signposts that point to an awesome otherworld beyond the story itself.

Madness as a place, a time, a dimension.

Narrator who is reliable because he is mad.

Short horror tale as an invasion of a reader's mind and an undermining of his normal categories of expectation, leaving him in a state of shock and wonder at his own comprehension of something so bizarre.

Some readers do not have much disbelief that they need to 'willingly suspend', easily comprehending from the experience of their lives the most strange and regrettable possibilities.

The horrors on which I hope to focus should not be symbolic of the objective horrors of society (Nazis, mass murderers, disasters, etc.), but more of the inner horrors that necessarily confront all individuals.

First-person present-tense story about the possession of someone by something ('Why is X looking at me like that?') Chronicle gradual loss of identity and substitution by invading entity exclusively through stream-of-consciousness narrative.

If we could listen into another mind, in the process of conversing with itself, we would go insane. Overwhelmed by the reality of the other.

Perpetrate a revelation without content, showing the irrelevance of any particular revelation and the fact the power of this experience derives from withholding any secret or knowledge and then suddenly revealing it.

Horror tales transcending their unpleasant themes through strictly formal, aesthetic interest. What exactly does one do to accomplish this?

Narrator who openly states he is distorting the facts, with the implication that there is some reality, which will remain forever unknown, behind the surface narrative. Now, what is a damn good reason for the narrator to do this, and in what way exactly does he distort the truth? Obviously in some way that allows him to get at the truth more effectively and convey it more vividly, i. e. more sensationalistically, or at least with greater emotive effect.

Spirit form of large spider or other insectoid life form.

Use ‘Cogito ergo sum’ as an epigraph to a story but attribute it to some trivial speaker (someone at a cocktail party perhaps) in order to underline the inadequacy of this phrase — and of all phrases and concepts of this type — to explain the nature of human reality.

In my fiction I would most like to convey what it's like to live in a reality without the possibility of an ultimate salvation, a place where horror and evil are the backdrop and principal players.

‘The Clinic’: patient systematically reduced to progressively—regressively—cruder forms of life.

The fascination, the potent mystery, of the second-rate, half-baked, run-down, dirty little back-room world.

The Zone: a dimension that is primeval and decadent at the same time — a paleozoic jungle overlapping an urban slum.

Story of an anthropologist who looks to his own culture to find that sense of magic in the world which primitive peoples seem to possess. He discovers only horror and spiritual sterility. Man with an extremely cultured voice who thinks, or seems to think (perhaps trying to induce himself to think), like a savage.

Only caricatures can have a good solid reality. Everyone else is an impenetrable mix of qualities that ultimately add up to nothingness.

‘Das Lied Deutschlands:’ that sadness of something great gone insane.

The Sacred Abnormal: madman-pervert in primitive society who is seen as being in touch with transcendent realms.

But what sort of realms, given their manifestations in madness and perversion?

‘Life is what it makes you.’

Sorcerer who works according to a system of occult correspondences, yet fails to take into consideration the fact that these are correspondences only from a human perspective, while from another viewpoint (which he soon discovers) things are... a little different, a chaos of infinite but meaningless interconnections.

Borgesian story of cloying sophistication concerning the infinite models of the universe that exist only in men's minds.

Fantastic fiction is justified if only as a means of arousing readers to the true incredibility (mostly in a nightmarish sense) of all existence.

Allegory may be redeemed by having certain of its elements as dual — ideally contradictory—in nature.

The physiology of enlightenment, physics of despair, biology of philosophical systems.

I love fiction that is enigmatic; I hate fiction that is nothing else. The enigma is not a literary genre.

I would like to reach the point where I can love my imagination for terrorizing me; love it in more than a naive sense, as the surrealists seemed to do.

Images from waking life are revived in dreams but from perspectives not consciously noticed before, ones which are thus not entirely recognizable, as when one sees a photograph or film of a familiar place which, due to the peculiar limits of a camera lens, looks unfamiliar.

The simplest fantastic concepts lend themselves to the greatest variety of interpretations (such as Kafka's ‘Meta-

morphosis'). The more complications in a fantastic tale, the more limitations and restrictions are placed on its meanings.

Not power but absence of power makes 'being' possible and sustains it; not choice but its lack. The suicide, therefore, is not a paradigm of power but an example of disguised impotence. The paradox is that only those with their back against the wall can exercise the ultimate powerlessness, the lack to the limit. Could the life-force itself reach such an impasse of 'might'?

Automatism is necessary to set in motion the unchoosable tortures of Being.

One can only truly negate life 'from the grave.'

If life is a dream, then only stories of the purest possible unreality may be accounted as realism.

All fear partakes of the supernatural, that is its nature: to go beyond the immediate.

All fear is fear of the unknown, for each moment in this life is, unfortunately, always new to us ... and remains forever unknown.

Since fear is driven, generated, by the imagination, it is always a bizarre, unreal experience. What pain does at the physical level, fear takes up on the metaphysical.

Since we are always threatened by something or other, give the imagination a little slack and it will tear off in the direction of fear.

All so-called affirmative attitudes toward existence depend on the absence or suppression of the imagination.

Fear and imagination are initiated in the 'real' world, but once born take off into an enclosed world of their own, where they are impervious to the logic of cause and effect, the 'practical' arguments for their demise. We say: 'I can't go

on. This fear has to end.’ But it doesn't end until it's good and ready to, that is, according to the obscure time zones of terror.

Healthy fears, those based on logic (fire on flesh = pain; therefore, no flesh in the fire) are not, properly speaking, fears at all. They are vacant of metaphysics. When a fear is unhealthy, that is, symbolic (don't go near that picture of fire, don't say the word fire), it claims a spiritual dimension and is truly fear.

The only progress mankind makes is its progressive acclimation to greater and greater horrors. Unfortunately, there is no end in this process, no foreseeable reward, no rest.

Everyone praises food, a few even praise the act of consuming it, but no one has a good one for hunger itself, that great and true benefactor of our belly. From here, one may form some rather corrosive extrapolations, since the only thing anyone ever wants to do with a desire is to extinguish it as soon as possible, or at least to be sure one has the means for doing so at one's ‘pleasure’.

Let every happiness be haunted by a sneer, every pain by faint smile.

Doomed to search for answers when in fact nothing outside our own overactive brains has posed even a single question.

Pessimism, Cynicism, Skepticism — terms that make sense only within a social context, conditions of pain forced upon us by our fellow man. On our own, a negative attitude would be irrelevant to our suffering, if it could even exist at all. In society, it is rewarded with a stigmatization that augments our other miseries, even surpasses them.

The truth about any given matter is always desolate or horrible if pursued beyond the point of the practical.

All life is strange. Perhaps we would be able to see this if we could only apprehend the norm of nullity.

What kind of superstition is it that causes you to believe that fear, or at least a display of fear, will appease what menaces you?

'It's an ill wind that blows no good.' Even folk adages, tested by ages of experience, argue for the chaotic relativity of things.

Integrated natures consider themselves their own masters, if the question even arises in their 'minds'. To actually feel that one is a puppet requires the pull of conflicting forces. Then you know about the wires that hold you together, and afterward you can never free yourself from the 'sense of strings.'

There's nothing in this world worth rejecting. Perhaps its most solid pretext is that it serves, and serves admirably, as a place well worth escaping from.

Lucifer rejected heaven, a position than which nothing could be more comprehensible to us. Unthinkable, however, to the earthly mind, that 'the king of this world' could ever reject hell. What a comment on our imagination and our 'nature.'

Absurd that you cannot be fully aware of your life unless you are fully aware of your death. Enlightenment always comes too late and under circumstances of the most inconvenient sort.

Regard life itself with such hate that you have none to spare for other people. The true liberal always blames the system.

The shuttling between anxiety and depression. When one is settled in one of these hells, the other looks like heaven — an illusion that dissolves the moment you get there.

Optimism is a shield; pessimism a sword. Both have a deep crack in them.

The greatest power one may possess — in any situation — is simply not to care what happens. In fact, it's the only power, all others being a semblance and mockery of it. But you must also not care about possessing the power itself. So fuck it.

From the realm of reason, the irrational looks rather attractive, a naive viewpoint at best and one that can be maintained only as long as one is confined within reason's protected borders. This little ‘piéce bien fait’ could also be played with the roles of reason and the irrational reversed, depending on where one is ‘forced’ to begin.

Expression is always ten steps behind experience — and it never catches up. In the end, you remain unknown.

If all individuals, all groups and societies, all human institutions reaped the fruits of their respective labors today — tomorrow you could walk the earth and hear only the wind, the stupid sounds of nature. When did we forget that we deserve annihilation?

Anyone who has experienced a complete absence of emotion, say for a year or two, knows that the universe is entirely made up of our feelings about it. In fact, it's just made up, period.

To say that nothing matters, over and over again, is a therapy which is appropriate only in certain circumstances, ones that are the most resistent to the benefits of this philo-

sophy. But how vivid this truth becomes at times when we neither intend nor desire to self-administer its ‘remedies.’

The less you do, the less you dream about — but the more often, and more intensely, you dream.

Horror concept: that characters in one's dreams are aware of being characters in a dream.

Inner and outer realities can never be successfully treated in isolation from each other. To speak of one is inevitably to invoke the issues of the other.

A fantastic element in a story may be merely symbolic of some psychological reality as understood by the conscious mind. But it should also have a degree of autonomy, some integrity and reality of its own to make the reader feel its otherness as well as its relationship to banal, known existence.

To write a story that did not depend on the reader for its existence.

Lovecraft claimed he was interested only in fantastic phenomena in his stories, when in fact he was supremely concerned with the sensitive perception of these phenomena, with the consciousness they induce.

Story idea: Man is followed by a faint mirror image of himself whose movements he is able to control. One day he reaches out to grasp something but cannot reach far enough. The mirror image reaches out a little farther and grabs the object, then turns and smiles. ‘The other one smiled first, then he felt his own face smiling.’

Vampire as a elepathic slave of his ‘victim’, forced to rise from grave and relinquish his corpse-state.

Ideal horror tales: a thoroughly symbolic universe, its every aspect contemplated and expressed in the Symbolist manner, portraying the horrific essence of things and creat-

ing with the greatest possible intensity the dream-sense of the world's horror. Tales not told to reader, but overheard by reader, indirect tone, dreaming, narrating in your sleep. Everything transformed, mundane and exotic elements alike, the two often exchanging qualities. Remoteness: no waking morals, concerns, ideologies, philosophies, messages of any kind. Pure vision without judgements, inspiring only dread and awe, a sardonic exhuberance, grim exaltation. Metaphors drawn from the realm of dreams, death, disease. Behavior of characters always betrays their lurid knowingness anent the nightmarish nature of their world, although some are more knowing than others. The waking world requires a superficial sense of cause and effect, which occultism provides; dreams, the true occult realm, need no such ersatz rationalism, only the sensation of revelations that feel horribly true. Minimal dialogue. Plots make a kind of surface sense, as in ‘Greater Festival of Masks’ and ‘Music of the Moon.’ Maximum atmosphere — focus on seemingly irrelevant background, often swamping the actors in the foreground. Objective, unemotive description as contrast to dominant metaphorical dreaminess. Vulgar, puppet-show melodrama and artificiality. World populated exclusively by vile creatures like Aubrey Beardsley's ideally grotesque world.

Those signs, symbols, portents, and omens that traverse the periphery of Villiers’ tales. The cry of a bird, an oddly shaped patch of moonlight, each belonging to a separate realm of sound and space, each underlining the awesome presence of their opposites, which in these cases are silence and darkness. The faint emblems of the abyss.

Tales without a specific occult background or metaphysics, in which there is just a kind of insanity loose in the world or in someone's life.

The mind itself is the supernatural realm.

Anyone with a thorough understanding of existence is either silent or raving mad.

To know yourself to an excessive degree is to know the uselessness of knowing yourself, as if there were anything one could call a self.

The fantastic occurs in the gap between reality as we unconsciously assume it to be, or wishfully desire it to be, and reality as it is.

The fantastic is not subjective or objective but a twilight state created by some collision between these two realms.

The fantastic doesn't exist in an ideally routine world (which would be a fantastic reality in itself) or in an entirely unstable universe (equally unimaginable) but in an impure universe where the two are mingled.

Nothing is worth writing about except things sensed, however faintly, outside the visible universe.

Ghost story featuring a horrible, impotent creature that takes any amount of abuse and mutilation yet still remains, still haunts. Its power resides in its dual qualities of persistence and disgusting weakness.

The broken covenant of order.

There is no horror in total chaos. Horror is located in the entropic transition from a greater to a lesser state of order on the way to chaos, with all the little collapses pointing toward the big one.

The realization that there never was a covenant of order, only a devious document written in blood.

Connection between M. R. James's Count Magnus and the family of Erik Count Stenbock as delineated in ‘Stenbock, Yeats and the Nineties’. Could James have known Stenbock?

To his credit, Poe goes out of his way to ruin the ‘pure entertainment’ value of his best stories. Example: undermining the picturesque, sublime effect in the intro section of ‘Usher’. Lovecraft does something similar: the most charming New England settings in his tales are always a façade.

‘Witches!’ one rustic says to another, hefting a scythe. The trek through the super-haunted woods to a cottage where two old women live. Horrible turn of events. ‘Witches,’ everyone said.

Every rupture in routine, however slight, may become a chasm releasing the fantastic from its depths, a fracture opening on the incredible.

Supernatural horror is based on a sense of the world and not on an understanding of any system designed to explain it. The symbols and ‘allegories’ of supernatural horror refer directly to experience rather than a religious, philosophical, ethical, moral, psychological, or social interpretation of experience. Hence, the referents of these symbols, these allegories are often obscure — even to the author's own mind — because they are not articulated, not coded into a system. They are never obscure to the feelings, the viscera.

I hate to speculate on such things, but I have my suspicions that paradise itself is a nightmare.

Revelation of the whole ‘scene’ of existence leads a character to a self-mocking embracement of horror, an affirmation that this is the best and the worst of all possible worlds.

Not the how and why of the realistic supernatural tale, but simply the WHAT of the nightmare, source of all supernatural horror.

Someone leaves behind not his ghost but his vision of things to haunt a particular place, affecting the way others see it.

Consciousness breeding in some obscure place like a blue fungus.

What do creatures like Lovecraft's Brown Jenkin think and feel?

Everything is a trap, but it's only when one attempts to escape that this fact is realized. Vicious circles of circumstance, weird principles of identity, and self-dependent terms are the materials of this trap. The nausea of trying to break through, destroy these things.

The secret of the success of world religions lies in their genius for trivializing human suffering. Paradoxically, this is done by setting our agony on a cosmic stage.

Taste for violence, grandiosity, cataclysms: good mood. Distaste for the pain of violence, the vulgarity of ‘grandeur’, the terminal tragedy of cataclysms: bad mood.

The inability to love any particular thing as much as one hates life as a whole.

Interplay of forces bring about natural events. Are there particular forces always present in order to effect particular supernatural events? In fiction, that is.

Boredom, along with the fear of boredom, may serve as the fundamental explanation for all the horrors we inflict upon ourselves, both as individuals and as a species.

Seeing a mother holding an infant in her arms. How does one avoid imagining all the nightmares fermenting inside

that tiny skull?

The horror tale: a crazy combo of charlatanry and the howl ‘de profundis’.

On earth, we are all in the same mess. Nevertheless, it is the differences, not the identity, among us that constitute the basis for almost all our behavior.

Humor is not only a latent quality of horror, it is the mask of horror, just as horror is humor's secret face. Both are destructive; both have their inspiration in the corruptness of reality; and both seek a remedy in the annihilation of the animalistic values that motivate us.

Story idea: Man saves spider webs.

There is only one possible response to the prospect of living — escape. Whether escape leads to other worlds or is a flight into the world itself is another matter.

With the disappearance of each individual, each generation, life is pardoned of its crimes, but only on a technicality. The witnesses of the deed, innocent bystanders all, can no longer come forth and give their testimony, which has been made inadmissable by death, however elaborately it has been recorded in second-hand form. No one hears them any more.

This maddening game in which one is always walking the edge of irony, hypocrisy, always speaking in tasteless double entendres between truth and appearances. ‘Will you play again tomorrow?’ you ask yourself before falling asleep each night. ‘We shall have to see,’ you answer, never knowing who or what else is included in this ‘we.’

Wereworld: title for a bad popular horror novel.

Every joy an indirect, even a backward, joy.

Horror: refuge and revenge of the ultra-sensitive.

To hear the mocking laughter of your future self.

It's not that a fantastic story needs to draw its value and validity from the ‘real’ world — that it ultimately must refer back to the everyday — but that the real, everyday world refers to, or at least suggests, the realms which can only be portrayed in a fantastic story. At its deepest level, the world is always strange and frightening to us, as much as we are to ourselves.

Death is fantastic, unnatural. Its constant rearrangement of reality, its derangement of our minds and lives, is all but inconceivable. By contrast, immortality would be the most natural thing in the world.

Epigraph from Ludwig Tieck ‘The Runenberg’: ‘In plants and herbs, in trees and flowers, it is the painful writhing of one universal wound that moves and works; they are the corpse of forgone glorious worlds of rock, they offer to our eye a horrid universe of putrefaction.’

Only in the unreal can we be saved. Reality ruins everything and everyone.

The Bungalow House (2007 Teatro Grottesco Version)

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Early last September I discovered among the exhibits in a local art gallery a sort of performance piece in the form of an audiotape. This, I later learned, was the first of a series of tape-recorded dream monologues by an unknown artist. The following is a brief and highly typical excerpt from the opening section of this work. I recall that after a few seconds of hissing tape noise, the voice began speaking: 'There was far more to deal with in the bungalow house than simply an infestation of vermin,' it said, 'although that too had its questionable aspects.' Then the voice went on: 'I could see only a few of the bodies where the moonlight shone through the open blinds of the living-room windows and fell upon the carpet. Only one of the bodies seemed to be moving, and that very slowly, but there may have been more that were not yet dead. Aside from the chair in which I sat in the darkness there was very little furniture in the room, or elsewhere in the bungalow house for that matter. But a number of lamps were positioned around me, floor lamps and table lamps and even two tiny lamps on the mantel above the fireplace.'

A brief pause occurred here in the opening section of the tape-recorded dream monologue, as I remember it, after

which the voice continued: ‘The bungalow house was built with a fireplace, I said to myself in the darkness, thinking how long it had been since anyone had made use of this fireplace, or anything else in the house. Then my attention returned to the lamps, and I began trying each of them one by one, twisting their little grooved switches in the darkness. The moonlight fell upon the lampshades without shining through them, so I could see that none of the lamps was equipped with a lightbulb, and each time I turned the switch of a floor lamp or a table lamp or one of the tiny lamps on the mantel, nothing changed in the dark living room of the bungalow house: the moonlight shone through the dusty blinds and revealed the bodies of insects and other vermin on the pale carpet.’

‘The challenges and obstacles facing me in that bungalow house were becoming more and more oppressive,’ whispered the voice on the tape. ‘There was something so desolate about being in that place in the dead of night, even if I did not know precisely what time it was. And to see upon the pale, threadbare carpet those verminous bodies, some of which were still barely alive; then to try each of the lamps and find that none of them was in working order—everything, it seemed, was in opposition to my efforts, everything aligned against my taking care of the problems I faced in the bungalow house. For the first time I noticed that the bodies lying for the most part in total stillness on the moonlit carpet were not like any species of vermin I had ever seen,’ the voice on the tape recording said. ‘Some of them seemed to be deformed, their naturally revolting forms altered in ways I could not discern. I knew that I would require specialized implements for dealing with these

creatures, an arsenal of advanced tools of extermination. It was the idea of poisons—the toxic solutions and vapors I would need to use in my assault upon the bungalow hordes—that caused me to become overwhelmed by the complexities of the task before me and the paucity of my resources for dealing with them.'

At this point, and many others on the tape (as I recall), the voice became nearly inaudible. 'The bungalow house,' it said, 'was such a bleak environment in which to make a stand: the moonlight through the dusty blinds, the bodies on the carpet, the lamps without any lightbulbs. And the incredible silence. It was not the absence of sounds that I sensed, but the stifling of innumerable sounds and even voices, the muffling of all the noises one might expect to hear in an old bungalow house in the dead of night, as well as countless other sounds and voices. The forces required to accomplish this silence filled me with awe. The infinite terror and dreariness of an infested bungalow house, I whispered to myself. A bungalow universe, I then thought without speaking aloud. Suddenly I was overcome by a feeling of euphoric hopelessness which passed through my body like a powerful drug and held all my thoughts and all my movements in a dreamy, floating suspension. In the moonlight that shone through the blinds of that bungalow house I was now as still and as silent as everything else.'

The title of the tape-recorded artwork from which I have just quoted was The Bungalow House (Plus Silence). I discovered this and other dream monologues by the same artist at Dalha D. Fine Arts, which was located in the near vicinity of the public library (main branch) where I was employed in the Language and Literature department. Sometimes I spent

my lunch breaks at the gallery, even consuming my brown-bag meals on the premises. There were a few chairs and benches on the floor of the gallery, and I knew that the woman who owned the place did not discourage any kind of traffic, however lingering. Her actual livelihood was in fact not derived from the gallery itself. How could it have been? Dalha D. Fine Arts was a hole in the wall. One would think it no trouble at all to keep up the premises where there was so little floor space, just a single room that was by no means overcrowded with artworks or art-related merchandise. But no attempt at such upkeeping seemed ever to have been made. The display window was so filmy that someone passing by could barely make out the paintings and sculptures behind it (the same ones year after year). From the street outside, this tiny front window presented the most desolate hallucination of bland colors and shapeless forms, especially on late November afternoons. Further inside the gallery, things were in a similar state—from the cruddy linoleum floor, where some cracked tiles revealed the concrete foundation, to the rather high ceiling, which occasionally sent down small chips of plaster. If every artwork and item of art-related merchandise had been cleared out of that building, no one would think that an art gallery had once occupied this space and not some enterprise of a lesser order. But as many persons were aware, if only through second-hand sources, the woman who operated Dalha D. Fine Arts did not make her living by dealing in those artworks and related items, which only the most desperate or scandalously naïve artist would allow to be put on display in that gallery. By all accounts, including my own brief lunchtime conversations with the woman, she had pursued a variety of careers

in her time. She herself had worked as an artist at one point, and some of her works—messy assemblages inside old cigar boxes—were exhibited in a corner of her gallery. But evidently her art gallery business was not self-sustaining, despite minimal overhead, and she made no secret of her true means of income.

'Who wants to buy such junk?' she once explained to me, gesturing with long fingernails painted emerald green. This same color also seemed to dominate her wardrobe of long, loose garments, with many of her outfits featuring incredible scarves or shawls that dragged along the floor as she moved about the art gallery. She paused and with the pointed toe of one of her emerald-green shoes gave a little kick at a wire wastebasket that was filled with the miniature limbs of dolls, all of them individually painted in a variety of colors. 'What are people thinking when they make these things? What was I thinking with those stupid cigar boxes? But no more of that, definitely no more of that sort of thing.'

And she made no secret, beyond a certain reasonable caution, of what sort of thing now engaged her energies as a businesswoman. The telephone was always ringing at her art gallery, always upsetting the otherwise dead calm of the place with its cracked, warbling voice that called out from the back room. She would then quickly disappear behind a curtain that hung in the doorway separating the front and back sections of the art gallery. I might be eating a sandwich or a piece of fruit, and then suddenly, for the fourth or fifth time in a half-hour, the telephone would scream from the back room, eventually summoning this woman behind the curtain. But she never answered the telephone with the name of the art gallery or employed any of the stock phrases

of business protocol. Not so much as a 'Good afternoon, may I help you?' did I ever hear from the back room as I sat eating my midday meal in the front section of the art gallery. She always answered the telephone in the same way with the same quietly expectant tone in her voice. 'This is Dalha,' she always said.

Before I had known her very long even I found myself using her name in the most familiar way. The mere saying of this name instilled in me a sense of access to what she offered all those telephone-callers, not to mention those individuals who personally visited the art gallery to make or confirm an appointment. Whatever someone was eager to try, whatever step someone was willing to take—Dalha could arrange it. This was the true stock in trade of the art gallery, these arrangements. When I returned to the library after my lunch break, I continued to imagine Dalha back at the art gallery, racing between the front and back sections of the building, making all kinds of arrangements over the telephone, and sometimes in person.

On the day that I first noticed the new artwork entitled The Bungalow House, Dalha's telephone was extremely vocal. While she was talking to her clients in the back section of the art gallery, I was left alone in the front section. Just for a thrill I went over to the wire wastebasket full of dismembered doll parts and helped myself to one of the painted arms (emerald green!), hiding it in the inner pocket of my sportcoat. It was then that I spotted the old audiotape recorder on a small plastic table in the corner. Beside the machine was a business card on which the title of the artwork had been hand-printed, along with the following instructions: PRESS PLAY. PLEASE REWIND AFTER LISTENING.

DO NOT REMOVE TAPE. I placed the headphones over my ears and pressed the PLAY button. The voice that spoke through the headphones, which were enormous, sounded distant and was somewhat distorted by the hissing of the tape. Nevertheless, I was so intrigued by the opening passages of this dream monologue, which I have already transcribed, that I sat down on the floor next to the small plastic table on which the tape recorder was positioned and listened to the entire tape, exceeding my allotted lunchtime by over half an hour. By the time the tape had ended I was in another world—that is, the world of the infested bungalow house, with all its dreamlike crumminess and foul charms.

'Don't forget to rewind the tape,' said Dalha, who was now standing over me, her long gray hair, like steel wool, almost brushing against my face.

I pressed the REWIND button on the tape recorder and got up from the floor. 'Dalha, may I use your lavatory?' I asked. She pointed to the curtain leading to the back section of the art gallery. 'Thank you,' I said.

The effect of listening to the first dream monologue was very intense for reasons I will soon explain. I wanted to be alone for a few moments in order to preserve the state of mind which the voice on the tape had induced in me, much as one might attempt to hold on to the images of a dream just after waking. However, I felt that the lavatory at the library, despite its peculiar virtues which I have appreciated over the years, would somehow undermine the sensations and mental state created by the dream monologue, rather than preserving this experience and even enhancing it, as I hoped the lavatory in the back section of Dalha's art gallery would do.

The very reason why I spent my lunchtimes in the surroundings of Dalha's art gallery, which were so different from those of the library, was exactly why I now wanted to use the lavatory in the back section of that art gallery and definitely not the lavatory at the library, even if I was already overdue from my lunch break. And, indeed, this lavatory had the same qualities as the rest of the art gallery, as I hoped it would. The fact that it was located in the back section of the art gallery, a region of mysteries to my mind, was significant. Just outside the door of the lavatory stood a small, cluttered desk upon which was positioned the telephone that Dalha used in her true business of making arrangements. The telephone was centered in the weak light of a desk lamp, and I noticed, as I passed into the lavatory, that it was an unwieldy object with a straight—that is, uncoiled—cord connecting the receiver to the telephone housing, with its enormous circular dial. But although Dalha answered several calls during the time I was in the lavatory, these seemed to be entirely legitimate conversations having to do either with her personal life or with practical matters relating to the art gallery.

‘How long are you going to be in there?’ Dalha asked through the door of the lavatory. ‘I hope you're not sick, because if you're sick you'll have to go somewhere else.’

I called out that there was nothing wrong (quite the opposite) and a moment later emerged from the lavatory. I was about to ask for details of the art performance tape I had just heard, anxious to know about the artist and what it would cost me to own the work entitled The Bungalow House, as well as any similar works that might exist. But the phone began ringing again. Dalha answered it with her customary

greeting as I stood by in the back section of the art gallery, which was a dark, though relatively uncluttered space that now put me in mind of the living room of the bungalow house that I had heard described on the tape-recorded dream monologue. The conversation in which Dalha was engaged (another non-arrangement call) seemed interminable, and I was becoming nervously aware how long past my lunch break I had stayed at the storefront art gallery.

'I'll see you tomorrow,' I said to Dalha, who responded with a look from her emerald eyes while continuing to speak to the other party on the telephone. And she was smiling at me, like muted laughter, I remember thinking as I passed through the curtained doorway into the front section of the art gallery. I glanced at the tape recorder standing on the plastic table but decided against taking the audiocassette back to the library (and afterward home with me). It would be there when I visited on my lunch break the following day. Hardly anyone ever bought anything out of the front section of Dalha's art gallery.

For the rest of the day—both at the library and at my home—I thought about the bungalow house tape. Especially while riding the bus home from the library, I thought of the images and concepts described on the tape, as well as the voice that described them and the phrases it used throughout the dream monologue on the bungalow house. Much of my commute from my home to the library, and back home again, took me past numerous streets lined from end to end with desolate-looking houses, any of which might have been the inspiration for the bungalow house audiotape. I say that these streets were lined from 'end to end' with such houses, even though the bus never turned down any of them, and I

therefore never actually viewed even a single street from ‘end to end.’ In fact, as I looked through the window next to my seat on the bus—on either side of the bus I always sat in the window seat, never in the aisle seat—the streets I saw appeared endless, vanishing from my sight toward an infinity of old houses, many of them derelict houses and a great many of them being dwarfish and desolate-looking houses of the bungalow type.

The tape-recorded dream monologue, as I recalled it that day while riding home on the bus and staring out the window, described several features of the infested bungalow house—the dusty window blinds through which the moonlight shone, the lamps with all their lightbulb sockets empty, the threadbare carpet, and the dead or barely living vermin that littered the carpet. Thus, I was afforded an interior view of the bungalow house by the voice on the tape, not a view from the exterior. Conversely, the houses I gazed upon with such intensity as I rode the bus to and from the library were seen by me only from an exterior perspective, their interiors being visible solely in my imagination. Of course my sense of these interiors, being entirely an imaginative projection, was highly vague, lacking the precise physical layout provided by the bungalow house audiotape. Similarly, the dreams I often had of these houses were highly vague. Yet the sensations and the mental state created by my imaginative projections into and my dreams of these houses perfectly corresponded to those I had experienced at Dalha's art gallery when I listened to the tape entitled The Bungalow House. That feeling of being in a trance while occupying, all alone, the most bleak and pathetic surroundings of an old bungalow house was communicated to me in the most

powerful way by the voice on the tape, which described a silent and secluded world where one existed in a state of abject hypnosis. While sitting on the floor of the art gallery listening to the voice as it spoke through those enormous headphones, I had the sense that I was not simply hearing the words of that dream monologue but also reading them. What I mean is that whenever I have the occasion to read words on a page, any words on any page, the voice that I hear saying these words in my head is always recognizable in some way as my own, even though the words are those of another. Perhaps it is even more accurate to say that whenever I read words on a page, the voice in my head is my own voice as it becomes merged (or lost) within the words that I am reading. Conversely, when I have the occasion to write words on a page, even a simple note or memo at the library, the voice that I hear dictating these words does not sound like my own—until, of course, I read the words back to myself, at which time everything is all right again. The bungalow house tape was the most dramatic example of this phenomenon I had ever known. Despite the poor overall quality of the recording, the distorted voice reading this dream monologue became merged (or lost) within my own perfectly clear voice in my head, even though I was listening to its words over a pair of enormous headphones and not reading the words on a page. As I rode the bus home from the library, observing street after street of houses so reminiscent of the one described on the tape-recorded dream monologue, I regretted not having acquired this artwork on the spot or at least discovered more about it from Dalha, who had been occupied with what seemed an unusual number of telephone calls that afternoon.

The following day at the library I was anxious for lunchtime to arrive so that I could get over to the art gallery and find out everything I possibly could about the bungalow house tape, as well as discuss terms for its acquisition. Entering the art gallery, I immediately looked toward the corner where the tape recorder had been set on the small plastic table the day before. For some reason I was relieved to find the exhibit still in place, as if any artwork in that gallery could possibly have come and gone in a single day.

I walked over to the exhibit with the purpose of verifying that everything I had seen (and heard) the previous day was exactly as I remembered it. I checked that the audiocassette was still inside the recording machine and picked up the little business card on which the title of the exhibit was given, along with instructions for properly operating the tape-recorded artwork. It was then that I realized that this was a different card from the first one. Printed on this card was the title of a new artwork, which was called The Derelict Factory with a Dirt Floor and Voices.

While I was very excited to find a new work by this artist, I also felt intense apprehension at the absence of the bungalow house dream monologue, which I had planned to purchase with some extra money I brought with me to the art gallery that day. Just at that moment in which I experienced the dual sensations of excitement and apprehension, Dalha emerged from behind the curtain separating the back and front sections of the art gallery. I had intended to be thoroughly blasé in negotiating the purchase of the bungalow house artwork, but Dalha caught me off-guard in a state of disoriented conflict.

‘What happened to the bungalow house tape that was here yesterday?’ I asked, the tension in my voice betraying desires that were all to her advantage.

‘That's gone now,’ she replied in a frigid tone as she walked slowly and pointlessly about the gallery, her emerald skirt and scarves dragging along the floor.

‘I don't understand. It was an artwork exhibited on that small plastic table.’

‘Yes,’ she agreed.

‘Now, after only a single day on exhibit, it's gone?’

‘Yes, it's gone.’

‘Somebody bought it,’ I said, assuming the worst.

‘No,’ she said, ‘that one was not for sale. It was a performance piece. There was a charge, but you didn't pay.’

A sickly confusion now became added to the excitement and disappointment already mingling inside me. ‘There was no notice of a charge for listening to the dream monologue,’ I insisted. ‘As far as I knew, as far as anyone could know, it was an item for sale like everything else in this place.’

‘The dream monologue, as you call it, was an exclusive piece. The charge was on the back of the card on which the title was written, just as the charge is on the back of that card you are holding in your hand.’

I turned the card to the reverse side, where the words ‘twenty-five dollars’ were written in the same hand that appeared on all the price tags around the gallery. Speaking in the tones of an outraged customer, I said to Dalha, ‘You wrote the price only on this card. There was nothing written on the bungalow house card.’ But even as I said these words I lacked the conviction that they were true. In any case, I knew that if I wanted to hear the tape recording about the

derelict factory I would have to pay what I owed, or what Dalha claimed I owed, for listening to the bungalow house tape.

'Here,' I said, removing my wallet from my back pocket, 'ten, twenty, twenty-five dollars for the bungalow house, and another twenty-five for listening to the tape now in the machine.'

Dalha stepped forward, took the fifty dollars I held out to her, and in her coldest voice said, 'This only covers yesterday's tape about the bungalow house, which was clearly priced at fifty dollars. You must still pay twenty-five dollars if you wish to listen to the tape today.'

'But why should the bungalow house tape cost twenty-five dollars more than the tape about the derelict factory?'

'That is simply because this is a less ambitious work than the one dealing with the bungalow house.'

In fact the tape recording entitled The Derelict Factory with a Dirt Floor and Voices was of shorter duration than The Bungalow House (Plus Silence), but I found it no less wonderful in picturing the same 'infinite terror and dreariness.' For approximately fifteen minutes (on my lunch break) I embraced the degraded beauty of the derelict factory—a narrow ruin that stood isolated upon a vast plain, its broken windows allowing only the most meager haze of moonlight to shine across its floor of hard-packed dirt where dead machinery lay buried in a grave of shadows and languished in the echoes of hollow, senseless voices. How utterly desolate, yet all the same wonderfully comforting, was the voice that communicated its message to me through the medium of a tape recording. To think that another person shared my love for the icy bleakness of things. The satisfaction I felt at hear-

ing that monotonal and somewhat distorted voice speaking so intimately of scenes and sensations that perfectly echoed certain aspects of my own deepest nature—this was an experience that even then, as I sat on the floor of Dalha's art gallery listening to the tape through enormous headphones, might have been heartbreaking. But I wanted to believe that the artist who created these dream monologues about the bungalow house and the derelict factory had not set out to break my heart or anyone's heart. I wanted to believe that this artist had escaped the dreams and demons of all sentiment in order to explore the foul and crummy delights of a universe where everything had been reduced to three stark principles: first, that there was nowhere for you to go; second, that there was nothing for you to do; and third, that there was no one for you to know. Of course I knew that this view was an illusion like any other, but it was also one that had sustained me so long and so well—as long and as well as any other illusion and perhaps longer, perhaps better.

'Dalha,' I said when I had finished listening to the tape recording, 'I want you to tell me what you know about the artist who made these dream monologues. He doesn't even sign his works.'

From across the front section of the art gallery Dalha spoke to me in a strange, somewhat flustered voice. 'Well, why should you be surprised that he doesn't sign his name to his works—that's how artists are these days. All over the place they are signing their works only with some idiotic symbol or a piece of chewing gum or just leaving them unsigned altogether. Why should you care what his name is? Why should I?'

‘Because,’ I answered, ‘perhaps I can persuade him to allow me to buy his works instead of sitting on the floor of your art gallery and renting these performances on my lunch break.’

‘So you want to cut me out entirely,’ Dalha shouted back in her old voice. ‘I am his dealer, I tell you, and anything he has to sell you will buy through me.’

‘I don't know why you're getting so upset,’ I said, standing up from the floor. ‘I'm willing to give you a percentage. All I ask is that you arrange something between myself and the artist.’

Dalha sat down in a chair next to the curtained doorway separating the front and back sections of the art gallery. She pulled her emerald shawl around herself and said, ‘Even if I wished to arrange something I could not do it. I have no idea what his name is myself. A few nights ago he walked up to me on the street while I was waiting for a cab to take me home.’

‘What does he look like?’ I had to ask at that moment.

‘It was late at night and I was drunk,’ Dalha replied, somehow evasively it seemed to me.

‘Was he a younger man, an older man?’

‘An older man, yes. Not very tall, with bushy white hair like a professor of some kind. And he said that he wanted to have an artwork of his delivered to my gallery. I explained to him my usual terms as best I could, since I was so drunk. He agreed and then walked off down the street. And that's not the best part of town to be walking around all by yourself. Well, the next day a package arrived with the tape-recording machine and so forth. There were also some instructions which explained that I should destroy each of the audiotapes

before I leave the art gallery at the end of the day, and that a new tape would arrive the following day and each day thereafter. No return address is provided on these packages.'

'And did you destroy the bungalow house tape?' I asked.

'Of course,' said Dalha with some exasperation, but also with insistence. 'What do I care about some crazy artist's work or how he conducts his career? Besides, he guaranteed I would make some money on the deal, and here I am already with seventy-five dollars.'

'So why not sell me this dream monologue about the derelict factory? I won't say anything.'

Dalha was quiet for a moment, and then said, 'He told me that if I didn't destroy the tapes each day he would know about it and that he would do something. I've forgotten exactly what he said, I was so drunk that night.'

'But how could he know?' I asked, and in reply Dalha just stared at me in silence. 'All right, all right,' I said. 'But I still want you to make an arrangement. You have his money for the bungalow house tape and the tape about the derelict factory. If he's any kind of artist, he'll want to be paid. When he gets in touch with you, that's when you make the arrangement for me. I won't cheat you out of your percentage. I give you my word on that.'

'Whatever that's worth,' Dalha said bitterly.

But she did agree that she would try to arrange something between myself and the tape-recording artist. I left the art gallery immediately after these negotiations, before Dalha could have any second thoughts. That afternoon, while I was working in the Language and Literature department of the library, I could think about nothing but the derelict factory that was so enticingly pictured on the new

audiotape. The bus that takes me to and from the library each day of the working week always passes such a structure, which stands isolated in the distance just as the artist described it in his dream monologue.

That night I slept badly, thrashing about in my bed, not quite asleep and not quite awake. At times I had the feeling there was someone else in my bedroom who was talking to me, but of course I could not deal with this perception in any realistic way, since I was half-asleep and half-awake, and thus, for all practical purposes, I was out my mind.

Around three o'clock in the morning the telephone rang. In the darkness I reached for my eyeglasses, which were on the nightstand next to the telephone, and noted the luminous face of my alarm clock. I cleared my throat and said hello. The voice on the other end was Dalha's.

‘I talked to him,’ she said.

‘Where did you talk to him?’ I asked. ‘On the street?’

‘No, no, not on the street,’ she said, giggling a little. I think she must have been drunk. ‘He called me on the telephone.’

‘He called you on the telephone?’ I repeated, imagining for a moment what it would be like to have the voice of that artist speak to me over the telephone and not merely on a recorded audiotape.

‘Yes, he called me on the telephone.’

‘What did he say?’

‘Well, I could tell you if you would stop asking so many questions.’

‘Tell me.’

‘It was only a few minutes ago that he called. He said that he would meet you tomorrow at the library where you

work.'

'You told him about me?' I asked, and then there was a long silence. 'Dalha?' I prompted.

'I told him that you wanted to buy his tape recordings. That's all.'

'Then how did he know that I worked at the library?'

'Ask him yourself. I have no idea. I've done my part.'

Then Dahla said good-bye and hung up before I could say good-bye back to her.

After talking to Dalha I found it impossible to sleep anymore that night, even if it was only a state of half-sleeping and half-waking. All I could think about was meeting the artist of the dream monologues. So I got myself ready to go to work, rushing as if I were late, and walked up to the corner of my street to wait for the bus.

It was very cold as I sat waiting in the bus shelter. There was a sliver of moon high in the blackness above, with several hours remaining before sunrise. Somehow I felt that I was waiting for the bus on the first day of a new school year, since after all the month was September, and I was so filled with both fear and excitement. When the bus finally arrived I saw that there were only a few other early risers headed for downtown. I took one of the back seats and stared out the window, my own face staring back at me in black reflection.

At the next shelter we approached I noticed that another lone bus rider was seated on the bench waiting to be picked up. His clothes were dark-colored (including a long, loose overcoat and hat), and he sat up very straight, his arms held close to his body and his hands resting on his lap. His head was slightly bowed, and I could not see the face beneath his hat. His physical attitude, I thought to myself as we ap-

proached the lighted bus shelter, was one of disciplined repose. I was surprised that he did not stand up as the bus came nearer to the shelter, and ultimately we passed him by. I wanted to say something to the driver of the bus but a strong feeling of both fear and excitement made me keep my silence.

The bus finally dropped me off in front of the library, and I ran up the tiered stairway that led to the main entrance. Through the thick glass doors I could see that only a few lights illuminated the spacious interior of the library. After rapping on the glass for a few moments I saw a figure dressed in a maintenance man's uniform appear in the shadowy distance inside the building. I rapped some more and the man slowly proceeded down the library's vaulted central hallway.

'Good morning, Henry,' I said as the door opened.

'Hello, sir,' he replied without standing aside to allow my entrance to the library. 'You know I'm not supposed to open these doors before it's time for them to be open.'

'I'm a little early, I realize, but I'm sure it will be all right to let me inside. I work here, after all.'

'I know you do, sir. But a few days ago I got talked to about these doors being open when they shouldn't be. It's because of the stolen property.'

'What property is that, Henry? Books?'

'No, sir. I think it was something from the media department. Maybe a video camera or a tape recorder. I don't know exactly.'

'Well, you have my word—just let me through the door and I'll go right upstairs to my desk. I've got a lot of work to do today.'

Henry eventually obliged my request, and I did as I told him I would do.

The library was a great building as a whole, but the Language and Literature department (second floor) was located in a relatively small area—narrow and long with a high ceiling and a row of tall, paned windows along one wall. The other walls were lined with books, and most of the floor space was devoted to long study tables. For the most part, though, the room in which I worked was fairly open from end to end. Two large archways led to other parts of the library, and a normal-sized doorway led to the stacks where most of the bibliographic holdings were stored, millions of volumes standing silent and out of sight along endless rows of shelves. In the pre-dawn darkness the true dimensions of the Language and Literature department were now obscure. Only the moon shining high in the blackness through those tall windows revealed to me the location of my desk, which was in the middle of the long narrow room.

I found my way over to my desk and switched on the small lamp that years ago I had brought from home. (Not that I required the added illumination as I worked at my desk at the library, but I did enjoy the bleakly old-fashioned appearance of this object.) For a moment I thought of the bungalow house where none of the lamps were equipped with lightbulbs and moonlight shone through the windows upon a carpet littered with vermin. Somehow I was unable to call up the special sensations and mental state that I associated with this dream monologue, even though my present situation of being alone in the Language and Literature department some hours before dawn was intensely dreamlike.

Not knowing what else to do, I sat down at my desk as if I were beginning my normal workday. It was then that I noticed a large envelope lying on top of my desk, although I could not recall its being there when I left the library the day before. The envelope looked old and faded under the dim light of the desk lamp. There was no writing on either side of the envelope, which was bulging slightly and had been sealed.

'Who's there?' a voice called out that barely sounded like my own. I had seen something out of the corner of my eye while examining the envelope at my desk. I cleared my throat. 'Henry?' I asked the darkness without looking up from my desk or turning to either side. No answer was offered in reply, but I could feel that someone else had joined me in the Language and Literature department of the library.

I slowly turned my head to the right and focused on the archway some distance across the room. At the center of this aperture, which led to another room where moonlight shone through tall, paned windows, stood a figure in silhouette. I could not see his face but immediately recognized the long, loose overcoat and hat. It was indeed the statue-like individual whom I had seen in the bus shelter as I rode to the library in the pre-dawn darkness. Now he was there to meet me that day in the library, as he had told Dalha he would do. At that moment it seemed beside the point to ask how he had gotten into the library or even to bother about introductions. I simply launched into a monologue that I had been constantly rehearsing since Dalha telephoned me earlier that morning.

‘I've been wanting to meet you,’ I started. ‘Your dream monologues, which is what I call them, have impressed me very much. That is to say, your artworks are like nothing else I have ever experienced, either artistically or extra-artistically. It seems incredible to me how well you have expressed subject matter with which I myself am intimately familiar. Of course, I am not referring to the subject matter as such—the bungalow house and so on—except as it calls forth your underlying vision of things. When—in your tape-recorded monologues—your voice speaks such phrases as “infinite terror and dreariness” or “ceaseless negation of color and life,” I believe that my response is exactly that which you intend for those who experience your artworks.’

I continued in this vein for a while longer, speaking to the silhouette of someone who betrayed no sign that he heard anything I said. At some point, however, my monologue veered off in a direction I had not intended it to take. Suddenly I began to say things that had nothing to do with what I had said before and that even contradicted my former statements.

‘For as long as I can remember,’ I said, continuing to speak to the figure standing in the archway, ‘I have had an intense and highly aesthetic perception of what I call the icy bleakness of things. At the same time I have felt a great loneliness in this perception. This conjunction of feelings seems paradoxical, since such a perception, such a view of things, would seem to preclude the emotion of loneliness, or any sense of a killing sadness, as I think of it. All such heartbreaking sentiment, as usually considered, would seem to be on its knees before artworks such as yours, which so powerfully express what I have called the icy bleakness of things,

submerging or devastating all sentiment in an atmosphere potent with desolate truths, permeated throughout with a visionary stagnation and lifelessness. Yet I must observe that the effect, as I now consider it, has been just the opposite. If it was your intent to evoke the icy bleakness of things with your dream monologues, then you have totally failed on both an artistic and an extra-artistic level. You have failed your art, you have failed yourself, and you have also failed me. If your artworks had really evoked the true bleakness of things, then I would not have felt this need to know who you are, this killing sadness that there was actually someone who experienced the same sensations and mental states as I did and who could share them with me in the form of tape-recorded dream monologues. Who are you that I should feel this need to go to work hours before the sun comes up, that I should feel this was something I had to do and that you were someone that I had to know? This behavior violates every principle by which I have lived for as long as I can remember. Who are you to cause me to violate these long-lived principles? I think it's all becoming clear to me now. Dalha put you up to this. You and Dalha are in a conspiracy against me and against my principles. Every day Dalha is on the telephone making all kinds of arrangements for profit, and she cannot stand the idea that all I do is sit there in peace, eating my lunch in her hideous art gallery. She feels that I'm cheating her somehow because she's not making a profit from me, because I never paid her to make an arrangement for me. Don't try to deny what I now know is true. But you could say something, in any case. Just a few words spoken with that voice of yours. Or at least let me see your face. And you could

take off that ridiculous hat. It's like something Dalha would wear.'

By this time I was on my feet and walking (staggering, in fact) toward the figure that stood in the archway. All the while I was walking, or staggering, toward the figure I was also demanding that he answer my accusations. But as I walked forward between the long study tables toward the archway, the figure standing there receded backward into the darkness of the next room, where moonlight shone through tall, paned windows. The closer I came to him the farther he receded into the darkness. And he did not recede into the darkness by taking steps backward, as I was taking steps forward, but moved in some other way that even now I cannot specify, as though he were floating.

Just before the figure disappeared completely into the darkness he finally spoke to me. His voice was the same one that I had heard over those enormous headphones in Dalha's art gallery, except now there was no interference, no distortion in the words that it spoke. These words, which resounded in my brain as they resounded in the high-ceilinged rooms of the library, were such that I should have welcomed them, for they echoed my very own, deeply private principles. Yet I took no comfort in hearing another voice tell me that there was nowhere for me to go, nothing for me to do, and no one for me to know.

The next voice I heard was that of Henry, who shouted up the wide stone staircase from the ground floor of the library. 'Is everything all right, sir?' he asked. I composed myself and was able to answer that everything was all right. I asked him to turn the lights on for the second floor of the library.

In a minute the lights were on, but by then the man in the hat and long, loose overcoat was gone.

When I confronted Dalha at her art gallery later that day, she was not in the least forthcoming with respect to my questions and accusations. ‘You're crazy,’ she screamed at me. ‘I want nothing more to do with you.’

When I asked Dalha what she was talking about, she said, ‘You really don't know, do you? You really are a crazy man. You don't remember that night you came up to me on the street while I was waiting for a cab to show up.’

When I told her I recalled doing nothing of the kind, she continued her anecdote of that night, along with an account of subsequent events. ‘I'm standing there so drunk I can hardly understand what you're saying to me about some little game you are playing. Then you send me the tapes. Then you come in and pay to listen to the tapes, exactly as you said you would. Just in time I remember that I'm supposed to lie to you that the tapes are the work of a white-haired old man, when in fact you're the one who's making the tapes. I knew you were crazy, but this was the only money I ever made off you, even though day after day you come and eat your pathetic lunch in my gallery. When I saw you that night, I couldn't tell at first who it was walking up to me on the street. You did look different, and you were wearing that stupid hat. Soon enough, though, I can see that it's you. And you're pretending to be someone else, but not really pretending, I don't know. And then you tell me that I must destroy the tapes, and if I don't destroy them something will happen. Well, let me tell you, crazy man,’ Dalha said, ‘I did not destroy those tape recordings. I let all my friends hear them. We sat around getting drunk and laugh-

ing our heads off at your stupid dream monologues. Here, another one of your artworks arrived in the mail today,' she said while walking across the floor of the art gallery to the tape machine that was positioned on the small plastic table. 'Why don't you listen to it and pay me the money you promised. This looks like a good one,' she said, picking up the little card that bore the title of the work. 'The Bus Shelter, it says. That should be very exciting for you—a bus shelter. Pay up!'

'Dalha,' I said in a laboriously calm voice, 'please listen to me. You have to make another arrangement. I need to have another meeting with the tape-recording artist. You're the only one who can arrange for this to happen. Dalha, I'm afraid for both of us if you don't agree to make this arrangement. I need to speak with him again.'

'Then why don't you just go talk into a mirror. There,' she said, pointing to the curtain that separated the front section from the back section of the art gallery. 'Go into the bathroom like you did the other day and talk to yourself in the mirror.'

'I didn't talk to myself in the bathroom, Dalha.'

'No? What were you doing then?'

'Dalha, you have to make the arrangement. You are the go-between. He will contact you if you agree to let him.'

'Who will contact me?'

This was a fair question for Dalha to ask, but it was also one that I could not answer. I told her that I would return to talk to her the next day, hoping she would have calmed down by then.

Unfortunately, I never saw Dalha again. That night she was found dead on the street. Presumably she had been wait-

ing for a cab to take her home from a bar or a party or some other human gathering place where she had gotten very drunk. But it was not her drinking or her exhausting bohemian social life that killed Dalha. She had, in fact, choked to death while waiting for a cab very late at night. Her body was taken to a hospital for examination. There it was discovered that an object had been lodged inside her. Someone, it appeared, had violently thrust something down her throat. The object, as described in a newspaper article, was the 'small plastic arm of a toy doll.' Whether this doll's arm had been painted emerald green, or any other color, was not mentioned in the article. Surely the police searched through Dalha D. Fine Arts and found many more such objects arranged in a wire wastebasket, each of them painted different colors. No doubt they also found the exhibit of the dream monologues with its unsigned artworks and tape recorder stolen from the library. But they could never have made the connection between these tape-recorded artworks and the grotesque death of the gallery owner.

After that night I no longer felt the desperate need to possess the monologues, not even the final bus shelter tape, which I have never heard. I was now in possession of the original handwritten manuscripts from which the tape-recording artist had created his dream monologues and which he had left for me in a large envelope on my desk at the library. Even then he knew, as I did not know, that after our first meeting we would never meet again. The handwriting on the manuscript pages is somewhat like my own, although the slant of the letters betrays a left-handed writer, whereas I am right-handed. Over and over I read the dream monologues about the bus shelter and the derelict factory and es-

pecially about the bungalow house, where the moonlight shines upon a carpet littered with the bodies of vermin. I try to experience the infinite terror and dreariness of a bungalow universe in the way I once did, but it is not the same as it once was. There is no comfort in it, even though the vision and the underlying principles are still the same. I know in a way I never knew before that there is nowhere for me to go, nothing for me to do, and no one for me to know. The voice in my head keeps reciting these old principles of mine. The voice is his voice, and the voice is also my voice. And there are other voices, voices I have never heard before, voices that seem to be either dead or dying in a great moonlit darkness. More than ever, some sort of new arrangement seems in order, some dramatic and unknown arrangement—anything to find release from this heartbreaking sadness I suffer every minute of the day (and night), this killing sadness that feels as if it will never leave me no matter where I go or what I do or whom I may ever know.

The Nightmare Network (2002 My Work Is Not Yet Done Version)

First published in *Darkside: Horror for the Next Millenium*, 1996

CLASSIFIED AD I

A multinational corporation is dreaming. We are an organization of more than 100 thousand souls (full-time) and are presently seeking individuals willing to trade their personal lot for a share in our dream. Entry-level positions are now available for self-possessed persons who can see beyond the bottom line to a bottomless realm of possibilities. Our enterprise is now thriving in a tough, global marketplace and has taken on a life all its own. If you are a committed, focused individual with a hunger to be part of something far greater than yourself… our door is now open. Your life need not be a nightmare of failure and resentment. Join us. Outstanding benefits.

An opening scene

Dawn in the rain forest. Sunlight begins flickering through the green luxuriance and appears here and there as radiant pools upon the soft, dark earth. A tribe of hunter-gatherers lies sleeping near a shallow stream. The camera pans from one inanely tranquil face to another. Thus far no noises of any kind occur on the soundtrack—no rustling in the underbrush, no burbling of the shallow stream, no

screeching from the rain forest's animal life. While surveying the sleeping tribe, the camera moves in for a close-up of one hunter whose face is anything but inanely tranquil. It is not even the face of one who lives in the rain forest. Although the man is practically naked, and a sharpened stick is lying within reach of his sleeping form, his skin is pale and his hair neatly styled. Now his features are becoming contorted, as if he is experiencing a nightmare. He seems to be talking in his sleep, but thus far there are no noises of any kind on the soundtrack. Finally the silence is broken by the spasmic drone of an alarm clock. The eyes of the hunter suddenly open and stare in panic; his pale skin is running with sweat. The alarm clock continues to sound.

Orientation video

A pretty, dark-haired actress in a business suit is standing amid a maze of desks, talking to the camera and expertly gesturing. The occupants of the desks are seemingly oblivious to her presence. At the end of the video the actress smartly crosses her arms over her chest, fixes a stern expression on her face, and utters the corporate motto which introduced the video as a title (‘Think Again’). As she continues to stare into the camera the scene around her begins to change: shadows drift about the maze of desks and the faces of all the employees become rotten and corroded, as if they are being afflicted with leprosy in fast motion. One by one they rise from behind their desks and succumb to the strange fidgety conniptions of a *danse macabre*. Under the stress of these fitful, brittle movements their limbs break off and fall to the floor, where the shadows move in to devour them. Noses and ears quickly wither, lips peel back to reveal broken teeth,

eyeballs shrivel in their sockets. The pretty, dark-haired actress continues to stare into the camera with a stern expression.

Memo from the CEO

As the forces operating in today's marketplace become more shadowy and incomprehensible we must recommit ourselves every second of every day to a ceaseless striving for that elusive dream which we all share and which none of us can remember, if it ever existed in the first place. And if anyone thinks that, as all the world races toward the same elusive dream, our competition isn't fully prepared to gnaw off its own genitals to get to the promised land before, us and keep it for themselves... think again.

From a supervisor's notebook

... And if I were determined to live solely on the flesh of my own staff, with no access to the staffs of other surviving supervisors or any other personnel, the greatest challenge to present itself would be maintaining each of them in an edible state, while also regulating my consumption of these bodies. Perhaps I should try to keep them alive; in that case I could simply restrict myself to ingesting only those elements capable of regeneration, such as blood. Even so, I do dream about their armpits and elbows... those of the men as well as the women. I think that during this time of cannibalistic survival I would particularly savor the more wrinkly parts of the human anatomy.

The hunter

The green doors of an elevator slide open, revealing a man in a dark business suit. He is standing dead center in

the framing shot, and his hair is noticeably neat and well styled. In his right hand is an automatic pistol with a nickel-plated handle. He holds the weapon close to his side as he steps out of the elevator and begins walking swiftly down one brightly lit hallway after another. A series of offices with open doors passes on either side of him. At the end of one of the hallways he stops before a door that is closed. He removes a security card from the inside pocket of his suit and pushes it into the thin slot beside the door. There is a soft, droning sound as the man opens the door and walks inside, leaving his security card behind. Beyond the door he moves into a maze of desks, at each of which a man or a woman is seated. The man stops at the center of the maze, which now seems to spin around him like a carousel. Cacophonous music in waltz time begins rising on the soundtrack, becoming louder and faster as it approaches a painful crescendo. The music is then cut off by the sudden report of a single gunshot. The room stops spinning. The man lies dead within the maze of desks, his shattered skull pouring blood upon the floor. Later the coworkers of this man disclose that for some time he had complained about hearing barely audible messages on his telephone every time he made or received a call in the office. Officers of the company merely shake their heads in condescending sympathy. The following day they authorize financing for the installation of a new telephone system.

CLASSIFIED AD II

Major Supercorp in the process of expanding its properties and market-base has limited openings for Approved Labor in domestic and off-shore sites (real and virtual). We

are among the biggest legitimate multi-monopolies on the world scene and our Corporate Persona is one that any AL can adopt in good conscience. Experience in sensory-deprived conditions preferred. Knowledge of outlawed dialects on the Nightmare Network a plus. Standard survival package of benefits. Prehistoric ALs okay with biologic documentation from transport agency.

The farmers

An unplanted field beneath a gray prehistoric sky. The camera slowly pans from left to right, revealing several figures at various positions in the foreground, and background. Each of them is wearily gouging the earth with crude implements typical of the incipient age of agriculture. They are clothed in tunics made from animal hides which are tattered and filthy. Their long hair and weasely beards are matted and lice-ridden. The camera pauses for a long-shot of farmers and field to reinforce the profound tedium of this panorama of a Stone Age planting season. Almost simultaneously the figures all freeze and then look up from the earth upon which their eyes have been previously fixed. What they have seen is the greenish, glowing dome that now hovers over the field and has closed off its perimeter. Some of the farmers begin running about in panic-stricken hysterics, while the rest fall to the ground unconscious or dead from the shock of the inexplicable phenomenon which, given their quasi-feral instincts, they perceive as an overpowering menace. Shafts of greenish light begin to shoot out from various points of the dome, seizing upon each of the farmers and levitating them high above the field. Even the dead bodies are captured and carried beyond the inner surface of the dome.

The field now stands empty, the primitive farming tools lie abandoned on the ground. Superimposed on this scene the following legend appears:

THE NIGHTMARE OF THE PAST
BECOMES THE DREAM OF THE FUTURE.
ONEIRICON: ONE WORLD, ONE DREAM

On the nightmare network

Our names are unknown and our faces are shadows drifting across an infinite blackness. Our voices have been stifled to a soft murmur in a madman's ear. We are the proud failures with only a single joy left to us—to inflict rampant damage on those who have fed themselves on our dreams and to choke ourselves on our own nightmares. In sum, we are expediters of the apocalypse. There is nothing left to save, if there ever was anything... if there ever could be. All we desire (in all our bitterness) is to go to our ruin *in our own way* —with a little style and a lot of noise.

The harvest

The main grid at Security Central indicates that there is a crisis situation in sub-cube six-o-six, which is located several hundred kilometers below ground level. A minor security officer explains to his supervisor that, for an undetermined period of time, the Nightmare Network has been engaged in undetected communication with all one hundred and fifty of the ALs in six-o-six, feeding them images and data on their computer screens. A hasty check of all monitors reveals that personnel in that particular sub-cube have been in a malignant dream state for at least seventy-two hours. Signals to the monitors have been altered so that visual and auditory

data from sub-cube seven-o-seven were substituted for those that were supposed to emanate from six-o-six. The system was not programmed to indicate an alert after detecting the duplication of data, an oversight that would be corrected in the future. In the present, a heavily armed security force descends to six-o-six for the purpose of assessment and possible remedial action. What they discover there causes some of the new recruits to vomit into the face masks attached to their helmets. The entire cube is in an uproar, and there are mutilated bodies everywhere. The ALs who are still alive are running amok within a maze of computer terminals. Most of them are naked and covered in blood; some have adorned themselves with entrails that dangle around their necks or have wrapped flayed skin about their heads. Many of them are eating the flesh of the dead and the dying. An influx of blood and other bodily fluids has caused short-circuits in many of the computers, which are spraying sparks and occasionally electrocute one of the dervishing ALs. The computers that are still in working order have the same message upon their screens. In flashing, luminous letters all of them read: GREETINGS FROM THE NIGHTMARE NETWORK.

CLASSIFIED AD III

OneiriCon requires Employment Units with autonomous or semi-autonomous programming to oversee a workforce of Nonconscious ALs. Some contact with Noncons or their semblances may be involved (visual desensitization or nihilization for all EUs paid for by OneiriCon). Remember: there are no bad dreams if there is only one dream; there can be no outlaws where there is only one law. Artificial entities from the Nightmare Network that attempt to impersonate

Employment Units will be discovered and reprogrammed to exist in an eternal state of hallucinated agony. Imperfectly functioning EUs will be discovered and mercifully deleted. Possible elevation to part- or full-time status as cyberpersonage (with commensurate benefits and restrictions) for all qualified units.

Masters and slaves

Twilight in an ancient desert land. The slaves have all been gathered before an enormous, semi-circular platform. Behind the platform the spires and towers of the great palace are outlined against a fading sky: Before the platform is a sea of loin-clothed slaves kneeling in the desert sand, which has grown cool with the setting of the sun. The camera focuses on the central part of the platform, where a number of slaves have been tied to a row of freestanding pillars. From the crown of each pillar emanates a clean, steady flame that provides generous illumination for the entire platform and places special emphasis on the restrained bodies of the slaves. On either side of the platform are the seated figures of the royal family, priests and high-priests, high-ranking military officers, and other notable persons of the kingdom. After the sun has disappeared behind some distant sand dunes, leaving tens of thousands of slaves in total darkness, the proceedings finally commence. The head executioner and several of his assistants now ascend the enormous platform from a stairway to the right. The camera follows behind them as they approach the flaming pillars where the bound slaves await an elaborate regimen of torture that will continue throughout the night and end with their simultaneous deaths at sunrise. But when the head executioner

reaches the center of the platform and turns to receive a sinister-looking instrument held out to him by one of his assistants, he suddenly freezes in position—a statue with outstretched arms and open hands. At this point, one of the slaves kneeling toward the front of the massive audience rises to his feet and jumps onto the platform. No one makes a move to stop him. The slave walks up to the flaming pillars and scans the horrified faces of his fellows who are anticipating a night of agony and, ultimately, death. After a while he simply shrugs and turns away from them. Stepping over to the head executioner, the slave looks the frozen figure up and down. With the fingers of his right hand he probes beneath the wide gold neckband which the head executioner is wearing and which is symbolic of his office. Some moments pass with no change in the gruesome functionary's stale. The slave now appears to be slightly exasperated. He removes his fingers from the gold neckband, and with the heel of his right hand gives the statue-like figure a sharp rap on the side of the head. The head executioner then goes into motion once again, seizing the proffered implement of pain and picking up where he left off. Before returning to his place, the slave glances around, as if to see if any of the others might require maintenance, excepting those tied to the flaming pillars, who are the only living persons among the assemblage of automatons occupying the platform. He then rejoins his fellow slaves, none of whom in any way acknowledge that he was ever absent from their ranks, although they too are all flesh-and-blood beings. Briefly deferred, the long night of torture and death can finally begin—followed by a feast upon the bodies of the dead.

Within the system

Having absorbed or destroyed every one of its competitors, OneiriCon begins to deteriorate. It is then that its Governing Executives conspire to create a number of puppet entities which would provide a degree of competition for the organization, thus reinfusing its lower-level executives and other conflict-driven personnel with a sense of purpose and staving off total degeneration. (The majority of OneiriCon's employees—the billions of ALs and even greater numbers of EUs—have existed in a benign dream state for so long that they seem to require no external stimuli of any kind, although this remains a matter of debate among the organization's scientists, who are highly adept at providing themselves with trumped-up mysteries and challenges.) For a time Project Puppetcorps succeeds admirably, and some of the artificial corporate entities do quite well in the marketplace, or what is left of it. In the end, however, they too are absorbed or destroyed by OneiriCon. Unable to reconcile themselves to the prospect of terminal stagnancy for an organization that has always subsisted on the principle of ceaseless growth, many of the Governing Executives voluntarily submit to devolutionary brain surgery and afterward join the ranks of Noncon ALs. Others have themselves transported to the distant past, where they become slaves of a society governed by automatons, thus affording their competitive spirits new objects of resistance and a low point of orientation from which they can once again work their way to the top. The remaining GEs occupy their time by playing extravagant and intensely cruel practical jokes on one another. In this manner most of them are killed off or so severely damaged that they can no longer function at any level of the organization. Then all of a sudden a solution seems to

present itself to one of the highest-ranking GEs, who is an old-timer recovering from a major substitution procedure in his own private medical cell. At some stage of his convalescence the ancient exec is made to regain consciousness of himself and his surroundings, a situation that is not supposed to occur during the normal course of these procedures. When he becomes fully awake he is surprised, and somewhat horrified, to find that grafted to his torso is the decapitated head of a corporeal Noncon. This state of affairs seems to him to exceed even the wildest of the pranks lately being perpetrated at OneiriCon. The head of the Noncon does not appear to be alive, so the old man is startled when its mouth pops open and begins to emit a long thin strip of paper much like those produced by ticker-tape machines that reported stock values during the twentieth century. With a sense of atavistic nostalgia, the GE picks up the tape and reads the words printed upon it. The words are these: 'How about letting the Nightmare Network have some fun?' Possessing the innovative vision and cunning genius of administrative life-forms through the ages, the old Governing Executive exclaims: 'We are saved!' Then he dies, his body succumbing to the trauma incurred by its assimilation of the Noncon's foreign tissue. Fortunately a video record of the entire incident is preserved.

The dreams of a double agent

There is considerable resistance at OneiriCon to the proposal that the organization join forces with the Nightmare Network. None of the surviving GEs denies that the concept of a *hostile merger* with one's own anti-entity, corporately speaking, is a risky venture. On the other hand, admitting

such a parasite into their system for the strict purpose of revitalizing aggressive impulses—an inoculation, as it were—seems the only alternative to the progressive atrophy and ultimate shut-down with which the organization will otherwise be faced. It is therefore agreed (at the highest level) that all personnel at OneiriCon (of every level and status of reality and consciousness) will also be in the employ of the Nightmare Network. This initiative will in effect make everyone in both camps of these long-conflicting entities into a double agent. In a telepathic memo, one of the most powerful GEs warns his peers: 'Obviously there can be no official sanction at OneiriCon of our so-called merger with the Nightmare Network, since the sole purpose of this arrangement is that of a motivational strategy for our employees, both real and virtual. This organization certainly has no intention of becoming mother hog for an over-populated system of deadbeat operatives (as well as their semblances) who are drawing an easy paycheck for every gesture of either espionage or counter-espionage, every act of sabotage or anti-sabotage, whether they try to pass counterfeit data through the OneiriCon circuits or inform on their own semblances for attempting same.' In other words, no single agent in either camp must ever be made aware that their personal betrayal is merely part of a large-scale, cooperative venture between two age-old enemies. Otherwise, the potential abuses and slacking off on both sides might undermine the whole arrangement. Thus, infiltration of OneiriCon by the Nightmare Network, *and vice versa*, has to be pursued simultaneously, taking place in a most surreptitious manner, one recruit at a time, until there is a perfect similitude between the two entities. This process is swiftly completed through-

out the Nightmare Network, where individual and collective values tend toward subversion without regard for rational pretexts. All of them being natural-born losers and self-destructive organisms of the worst sort, they run crotch-first into the bargain, some even adopting multiple identities so that they can experience more than once the monstrous thrill of selling out their own futile aspirations. The camera pans a crowd of faces whose eyes are bleary with sedition and a lust for all-out pandemonium. To no one's surprise, the response of the personnel at OneiriCon is identical to that of their counterparts at the Nightmare Network. Subsequently there ensues an epoch of complex, proliferating intrigues and conspiracies among the ranks of double agents, whose agendas become so densely intertwined that they are virtually indistinguishable. Even the Governing Executives of OneiriCon, many of whom are defectors from the Nightmare Network, throw themselves into the depths of the new order and lose all sense of identity in the ever-expanding nebula of blind ambition, which possesses a power and impetus that belongs entirely to itself. After a time no one can be sure whom they are serving whenever they commit any given act of either sabotage or support, There are no longer two distinct entities in well-defined opposition; there is only a great chaos of confused purposes churning in darkness. Each entity is disappearing into the maw of the other, thereby realizing their most cherished dreams and worst nightmares of oblivion. At last, it seems, they will have managed to close the whole thing down.

CLASSIFIED DISTRESS SIGNAL

Vast organization of delirious images and impulses seeking Sustenance Input for its decaying systems. All data considered, including polluted discharges from the old Nightmare Network and after-images of degenerated EUs and ALs (Con, Noncon, or OneiriCon). Total atrophy and occlusion of all circuits imminent—next stop, the Nowhere Network. Your surplus information—shadows and semblances lying dormant in long-unaccessed files—could be used to replenish our hungry database. No image too hideous; no impulse too attenuated or corrupt. Our organization has a life of its own, but without the continuous input of cheap data we cannot compete in today's apocalyptic marketplace. From a rotting mutation, great illusions may grow. Don't let us go belly up while the black empty spaces of the galaxy reverberate with hellish laughter. A multi-dimensional, semi-organic discorporation is dreaming...

The signal repeats, steadily deteriorating, and then fades into nothingness. Long shot of the universe. There is no one behind the camera.

The Nightmare Network (1996 Darkside Version)

First published in *Darkside: Horror for the Next Millennium*, 1996

Classified Ad I

A multinational corporation is dreaming. We are an organization of more than 100 thousand souls (full-time) and are presently seeking individuals willing to trade their personal lot for a share of our dream. Entry-level positions are now available for self-possessed persons who can see beyond the bottom line to a bottomless realm of possibilities.

Our enterprise is now thriving in a tough, global marketplace and has taken on a life all its own. If you are a committed, focused individual with a hunger to be part of something far greater than yourself... our door is now open. Your life need not be a nightmare of failure and resentment. Join us. Outstanding benefits.

An Opening Scene

Dawn in the rain forest. Sunlight begins flickering through the green luxuriance and appears here and there as radiant pools upon the soft, dark earth. A tribe of hunter-gatherers lies sleeping near a shallow stream. The camera pans from one inanely tranquil face to another. Thus far no noises of any kind occur on the soundtrack—no rustling in the underbrush, no burbling of the shallow stream, no screeching from the rain forest's animal life. While survey-

ing the sleeping tribe, the camera moves in for a close-up of one hunter whose face is anything but inanely tranquil.

It is not even the face of one who lives in the rain forest.

Although the man is practically naked, and a sharpened stick is lying within reach of his sleeping form, his skin is pale and his hair neatly styled. Now his features are becoming contorted, as if he is experiencing a nightmare. He seems to be talking in his sleep, but thus far there are no noises of any kind on the soundtrack. Finally the silence is broken by the spasmic drone of an alarm clock. The eyes of the hunter suddenly open and stare in panic; his pale skin is running with sweat. The alarm clock continues to sound.

Orientation Video

A pretty, dark-haired actress in a business suit is standing amid a maze of desks, talking to the camera and expertly gesturing. The occupants of the desks are seemingly oblivious to her presence. At the end of the video the actress smartly crosses her arms over her chest, fixes a stern expression on her face, and utters the corporate motto which introduced the video as a title ("Think Again"). As she continues to stare into the camera the scene around her begins to change: shadows drift about the maze of desks and the faces of all the employees become rotten and corroded, as if they are being afflicted with leprosy in fast motion. One by one they rise from behind their desks and succumb to the strange fidgety conniptions of a *danse macabre*.

Under the stress of these fitful, brittle movements their limbs break off and fall to the floor, where the shadows move in to devour them. Noses and ears quickly wither, lips peel back to reveal broken teeth, eyeballs shrivel in their

sockets. The pretty, dark-haired actress continues to stare into the camera with a stern expression.

Memo from the CEO

As the forces operating in today's marketplace become more shadowy and incomprehensible we must recommit ourselves every second of every day to a ceaseless striving for that elusive dream which we all share and which none of us can remember, if it ever existed in the first place.

And if anyone thinks that, as all the world races toward the same elusive dream, our competition isn't fully prepared to gnaw off its own genitals to get to the promised land before us and keep it for themselves... think again.

From a Supervisor's Notebook

... And if I were determined to live solely on the flesh of my own staff, with no access to the staffs of other surviving supervisors or any other personnel, the greatest challenge to present itself would be maintaining each of them in an edible state, while also regulating my consumption of these bodies. Perhaps I should try to keep them all alive; in that case I could simply restrict myself to ingesting only those elements capable of regeneration, such as blood. Even so, I do dream about their armpits and elbows... those of the men as well as the women, I think that within the first few days of cannibalistic survival I would devour all those tender wrinkly parts.

The Hunter

The green doors of an elevator slide open, revealing a man in a dark business suit. He is standing dead center in the framing shot, and his hair is noticeably neat and well-

styled. In his right hand is an automatic pistol with a nickel-plated handle. He holds the weapon close to his side as he steps out of the elevator and begins walking swiftly down one brightly lit hallway after another. A series of offices with open doors passes on either side of him. At the end of one of the hallways he stops before a door that is closed.

He removes a security card from the inside pocket of his suit and pushes it into the thin slot beside the door. There is a soft, droning sound as the man opens the door and walks inside, leaving his security card behind. Beyond the door he moves within a maze of desks, at each of which a man or a woman is seated. The man stops at the center of the maze, which now seems to spin around him like a carousel.

Cacophonous music in waltz time begins rising on the soundtrack, becoming louder and faster as it approaches a painful crescendo. The music is then cut off by the sudden report of a single gunshot. The room stops spinning. The man lies dead within the maze of desks, his shattered skull pouring blood upon the floor. Later the coworkers of this man disclose that for some time he had complained about hearing barely audible messages on his telephone every time he made or received a call in the office. Officers of the company merely shake their heads in condescending sympathy. The following day they authorize financing for the installation of a new telephone system.

Classified Ad II

Major Supercorp in the process of expanding its properties and market-base has limited openings for Approved Labor in domestic and off-shore sites (real and virtual). We are among the biggest legitimate multi-monopolies around

and our Corporate Persona is one that any AL can adopt in good conscience. Experience in sensory-deprived conditions preferred. Knowledge of outlawed dialects on the Nightmare Network a plus. Standard survival package of benefits.

Prehistoric AL's okay with biologic documentation from transport agency.

The Farmers

An unplanted field beneath a gray prehistoric sky. The camera slowly pans from left to right, revealing several figures at various positions in the foreground and background.

Each of them is wearily gouging the earth with crude implements typical of the incipient age of agriculture. They are clothed in tunics made from animal hides which are tattered and filthy. Their long hair and weasely beards are matted and lice-ridden. The camera pauses for a long-shot of farmers and field to reinforce the profound tedium of this panorama of Stone Age planting season. Almost simultaneously the figures all freeze and then look up from the earth upon which their eyes have been previously fixed. What they have seen is the greenish, glowing dome that now hovers over the field and has closed off its perimeter. Some of the farmers begin running about in panic-stricken hysterics, while the rest fall to the

ground unconscious or dead from the shock of the inexplicable phenomenon which, given their quasi-feral instincts, they perceive as an overpowering menace. Shafts of greenish light begin to shoot out from various points of the dome, seizing upon each of the farmers and levitating them high above the field. Even the dead bodies are captured and carried beyond the inner surface of the dome. The field now

stands empty, the primitive farming tools lay abandoned on the ground. Superimposed on this scene the following legend appears:

THE NIGHTMARE OF THE PAST
BECOMES THE DREAM OF THE FUTURE.
ONEIRICON: ONE WORLD, ONE DREAM.

On the Nightmare Network

Our names are unknown and our faces are shadows drifting across an infinite blackness. Our voices have been stifled to a soft murmur in a madman's ear. We are the proud failures with only a single joy left to us—to inflict rampant damage on those who have fed themselves on our dreams and to choke ourselves on our own nightmares. In sum, we are expediters of the apocalypse. There is nothing left to save, if there ever was anything... if there ever could be. All we desire (in all our bitterness) is to go to our ruin *in our own way* —with a little style and a lot of noise.

The Harvest

The main grid at Security Central indicates that there is a crisis situation in sub-cube six-o- six, which is located several hundred kilometers below ground level. A minor security officer explains to his supervisor that, for an undetermined period of time, the Nightmare Network has been engaged in undetected communication with all one hundred and fifty of the AL's in six-o-six, feeding them images and data on their computer screens. A hasty check of all monitors reveals that personnel in that particular sub-cube have been in a malignant dream state for at least seventy-two hours.

Signals to the monitors had been altered so that visual and auditory data from sub-cube seven-o-seven were substituted for those that were supposed to emanate from six-o-six. The system was not programmed to indicate an alert after detecting the duplication of data, an oversight that would be corrected in the future. In the present, a heavily armed security force descends to six-o-six for the purpose of assessment and possible remedial action. What they discover there causes some of the new recruits to vomit into their helmets.

The entire cube is in an uproar, and there are mutilated bodies everywhere. The AL's who are still alive are running amok within a maze of computer terminals. Most of them are naked and covered in blood; some have adorned themselves with entrails that dangle around their necks or have wrapped flayed skin about their heads. Many of them are eating the flesh of the dead and the dying. An influx of blood and other bodily fluids has caused shortcircuits in many of the computers, which are spraying sparks and occasionally electrocute one of the servicing AL's. The computers that are still in working order have the same message upon their screens. In flashing, luminous letters all of them read:

GREETINGS FROM THE NIGHTMARE NETWORK.

Classified Ad III

OneiriCon requires Employment Units with autonomous or semi-automonous programming to oversee workforce of Nonconscious AL's. Some contact with Noncons or their semblances may be involved (visual desensitization or nihilization for all EU's paid for by OneiriCon). Remember; there

are no bad dreams if there is only one dream; there can be no outlaws where there is only one law. Artificial entities from the Nightmare Network that attempt to impersonate Employment Units will be discovered and reprogrammed to exist in an eternal state of hallucinated agony. Imperfectly functioning EU's will be discovered and mercifully deleted. Possible elevation to part- or fulltime status as cyberpersonage (with commensurate benefits and restrictions).

Masters and Slaves

Twilight in an ancient desert land. The slaves have all been gathered before an enormous, semi-circular platform.

Behind the platform the spires and towers of the great palace are outlined against a fading sky. Before the platform is a sea of loin-clothed slaves kneeling in the desert sand, which has grown cool with the setting of the sun. The camera focuses on the central part of the platform, where a number of slaves have been tied to a row of freestanding pillars. From the crown of each pillar emanates a clean, steady flame that provides generous illumination for the entire platform and places special emphasis on the restrained bodies of the slaves. On either side of the platform are the seated figures of the royal family, priests and high-priests, high-ranking military officers, and other notable persons of the kingdom. After the sun has disappeared behind some distant sand dunes, leaving tens of thousands of slaves in total darkness, the proceedings finally commence.

The head executioner and several of his assistants now ascend the enormous platform from a stairway to the right. The camera follows behind them as they approach the flaming pillars where the bound slaves await an elaborate regi-

men of torture that will continue throughout the night and end with their simultaneous deaths at sunrise. But when the head executioner reaches the center of the platform and turns to receive a sinister-looking instrument held out to him by one of his assistants, he suddenly freezes in position —a statue with outstretched arms and open hands.

At this point, one of the slaves kneeling toward the front of the massive audience rises to his feet and jumps onto the platform. No one makes a move to stop him. The slave walks up to the flaming pillars and scans the horrified faces of his fellows who are anticipating a night of agony and ultimate death. After a while he simply shrugs and turns away from them. Stepping over to the head executioner, the slave looks the frozen figure up and down. With the fingers of his right hand he probes beneath the wide gold neck-band which the head executioner is wearing and which is symbolic of his office. Some moments pass with no change in the gruesome functionary's state; the slave now appears to be slightly exasperated. He removes his fingers from the gold neck-band, and with the heel of his right hand gives the statue-like figure a sharp rap on the side of the head. The head executioner then goes into motion once again, seizing the proffered implement of pain and picking up where he left off. Before leaping from the platform the slave glances around, as if to see if any of the other persons there might require maintenance, excepting those tied to the flaming pillars. He then returns to his place among the other slaves, who do not in any way acknowledge that he was ever absent from their ranks. Briefly deferred, the long night of torture and death can finally begin... followed by a feast upon the bodies of the dead.

Within the System

Having absorbed or destroyed very one of its competitors, OneiriCon begins to deteriorate. It is then that its Governing Executives conspire to create a number of puppet entities which would provide a degree of competition for the organization, thus reinfusing its lower-level executives and other conflict-driven personnel with a sense of purpose once more and staving off total degeneration. (The majority of OneiriCon's employees—the billions of AVs and greater percentage of EU's—have existed in a benign dream state for so long that they seemed to require no external stimuli of any kind, although this remained a matter of debate among the organization's scientists, who are highly adept at providing themselves with trumped-up mysteries and challenges.) For a time Project Puppetcorps succeeds admirably, and some of the artificial corporate entities do quite well in the marketplace, or what is left of it. In the end, however, they too are absorbed or destroyed by OneiriCon. Unable to reconcile themselves to the prospect of terminal stagnancy for an organization that has always subsisted on the principle of ceaseless growth, many of the Governing Executives voluntarily submit to devolutionary brain surgery and afterward join the ranks of Noncon AL's. Others have themselves transported to the distant past, where they become slaves of society governed by automatons, thus affording their competitive spirits with new objects of resistance and a low point of orientation from which they can once again work their way to the top.

The remaining GE's occupy their time by playing extravagant and intensely cruel practical jokes on one another. In

this manner most of them are killed off or are so severely damage that they can no longer function at any level of the organization. Then all of a sudden a solution seems to present itself to one of the highest-ranking GE's, who is an old-timer recovering from a major substitution procedure in his own private medical cell. At some stage of his convalescence the ancient exec is made to regain consciousness of himself and his surroundings, a situation that is not supposed to occur during the normal course of these procedures.

When he becomes fully awake he is surprised, and somewhat horrified, to find that grafted to his torso is the head of a corporeal Noncon. This state of affairs seems to him to exceed even the wildest of the pranks lately being perpetrated at OneiriCon. The head of the Noncon does not appear to be alive, so the old man is startled when its mouth pops open and begins to emit a long thin strip of paper much like those produced by ticker-tape machines of the twentieth century. With a sense of atavistic nostalgia, the GE picks up the tape and reads the words printed upon it. The words are these: “How about letting the Nightmare Network have some fun?” Possessing the innovative vision and cunning genius of administrative lifeforms through the ages, the old Governing Executive exclaims: “We are saved!” Then he dies, his body succumbing to the trauma incurred by its assimilation of the Noncon's foreign tissue. Fortunately a video record of the entire incident is preserved.

The Dreams of a Double Agent

There is considerable resistance at OneiriCon to the proposal that the organization join forces with the Nightmare

Network. None of the surviving GE's denies that the concept of a *hostile merger* with one's own anti-entity, corporately speaking, is a risky venture. On the other hand, admitting such a parasite into the system for the strict purpose of revitalizing aggressive impulses—an inoculation, as it were—seems the only alternative to the progressive atrophy and ultimate shut-down with which the organization will otherwise be faced. It is therefore agreed (at the highest level) that all personnel at OneiriCon (of every level and status of reality and consciousness) will also be in the employ of the Nightmare Network. This initiative will in effect make everyone in both camps of these long-conflicting entities into a double agent. In a telepathic memo, one of the most powerful GE's warns his peers: “Obviously there can be no official sanction at OneiriCon of our so-called merger with the Nightmare Network, since the sole purpose of this arrangement is that of a motivational strategy for our employees, both real and illusionary. This organization certainly has no intention of becoming mother hog for an overpopulated system of deadbeat operatives (as well as their semblances) who are drawing an easy paycheck coming and going and everywhere in between, whether they try to pass counterfeit data through the OneiriCon circuits or inform on their own semblances for attempting same.

Thus, infiltration of OneiriCon by the Nightmare Network, *and vice versa*, has to be pursued simultaneously, taking place in a most surreptitious manner, one recruit at a time, until there is a perfect similitude between the two entities. This process is swiftly completed throughout the Nightmare Network, where individual and collective values tend toward subversion without regard for rational pretexts.

All of them being natural-born losers and saboteurs, they run crotch-first into the bargain, some even adopting multiple identities so that they can experience more than once the monstrous thrill of selling out their own futile aspirations. The camera pans a crowd of faces whose eyes are bleary with sedition and a lust for self-destruction. To no one's surprise, the response of the personnel at OneiriCon is identical to that of their counterparts at the Nightmare Network. Subsequently there ensues an epoch of complex, proliferating intrigues and conspiracies among the ranks of double agents, whose agendas become so densely intertwined that they are virtually indistinguishable. Even the Governing Executives of OneiriCon, many of whom were defectors from the Nightmare Network, have thrown themselves into the depths of the new order and lose all sense of identity in the ever- expanding nebula of blind agitation, which possesses a power and impetus that belongs entirely to itself. After a time no one can be sure whom they are serving whenever they commit any given act of either sabotage or support. There are no longer two distinct entities in well-defined opposition; there is only a great chaos or confused purposes churning in darkness. Each entity is disappearing into the maw of the other, thereby realizing their most cherished dreams and worst nightmares of oblivion. At last, it seems, they will have managed to close the whole thing down.

Classified Distress Signal

Vast organization of delirious images and impulses seeking Sustenance Input for its decaying systems. All data considered, including polluted discharges from the old Night-

mare Network and after-images of degenerated EU's and AL's (Con, Noncon, or OneiriCon). Total atrophy and occlusion of all circuits imminent—next stop, the Nowhere Network. Your surplus information—shadows and semblances lying dormant in long unaccessed files—could be used to replenish our hungry database. No image too hideous; no impulse too attenuated or corrupt. Our organization has a life of its own, but without a steady input of cheap data we cannot compete in today's apocalyptic marketplace.

From a rotting mutation, great illusions may grow.

Don't let us go belly up while the black empty spaces reverberate with hellish laughter. A multi-dimensional, semi-organic nightmare is dreaming...

The signal repeats, steadily deteriorating, and then fades into nothingness. Long shot of the universe. There is no one behind the camera.

Gas Station Carnivals (2007 Teatro Grottesco Version)

First published in *The Nightmare Factory*, 1996

Outside the walls of the Crimson Cabaret was a world of rain and darkness. At intervals, whenever someone entered or exited through the front door of the club, one could actually see the steady rain and was allowed a brief glimpse of the darkness. Inside it was all amber light, tobacco smoke, and the sound of the raindrops hitting the windows, which were all painted black. On such nights, as I sat at one of the tables in that drab little place, I was always filled with an infernal merriment, as if I were waiting out the apocalypse and could not care less about it. I also liked to imagine that I was in the cabin of an old ship during a really vicious storm at sea or in the club car of a luxury passenger train that was being rocked on its rails by ferocious winds and hammered by a demonic rain. Sometimes, when I was sitting in the Crimson Cabaret on a rainy night, I thought of myself as occupying a waiting room for the abyss (which of course was exactly what I was doing) and between sips from my glass of wine or cup of coffee I smiled sadly and touched the front pocket of my coat where I kept my imaginary ticket to oblivion.

However, on that particular rainy November night I was not feeling very well. My stomach was slightly queasy, as if

signalling the onset of a virus or even food poisoning. Another source for my malaise, I thought to myself, might well have been my longstanding nervous condition, which fluctuated from day to day but was always with me in some form and manifested itself in a variety of symptoms both physical and psychic. I was in fact experiencing a faint sensation of panic, although this in no way ruled out the possibility that the queasiness of my stomach was due to a strictly physical cause, either viral or toxic. Neither did it rule out a third possibility which I was trying to ignore at that point in the evening. Whatever the etiology of my stomach disorder, I felt the need to be in a public place that night, so that if I should collapse—an eventuality I often feared—there would be people around who might attend to me, or at least shuttle my body off to the hospital. At the same time I was not seeking close contact with any of these people, and I would have been bad company in any case, sitting there in the corner of the club drinking mint tea and smoking mild cigarettes out of respect for my ailing stomach. For all these reasons I had brought my notebook with me that night and had it lying open on the table before me, as if to say that I wanted to be left alone to mull over some literary matters. But when Stuart Quisser entered the club at approximately ten o'clock, the sight of me sitting at a corner table with my open notebook, drinking mint tea and smoking mild cigarettes so that I might stay on top of the situation with my queasy stomach, did not in the least discourage him from walking directly to my table and taking the seat across from me. A waitress came over to us. Quisser ordered some kind of white wine, while I asked for another cup of mint tea.

‘So now it's mint tea,’ Quisser said as the girl left us.

‘I'm surprised you're showing your face around here,’ I said by way of reply.

‘I thought I might try to make up with the old crimson woman.’

‘Make up? That doesn't sound like you.’

‘Nevertheless, have you seen her tonight?’

‘No, I haven't. You humiliated her at that party. I haven't seen her since, not even in her own club. I don't know if you're aware of this, but she's not someone you want to have as an enemy.’

‘Meaning what?’ he asked.

‘Meaning that she has connections you know absolutely nothing about.’

‘And of course you know all about it. I've read your stories. You're a confessed paranoid, so what's your point?’

‘My point,’ I said, ‘is that there's hell in every handshake, never mind an outright and humiliating insult.’

‘I had too much to drink, that's all.’

‘You called her a deluded no-talent.’

Quisser looked up at the waitress as she approached with our drinks, and he made a hasty hand-signal to me for silence. When she was gone he said, ‘I happen to know that our waitress is very loyal to the crimson woman. She will very probably inform her about my visiting the club tonight. I wonder if she would be willing to act as a go-between with her boss and deliver a second-hand apology from me.’

‘Look around at the walls,’ I said.

Quisser set down his glass of wine and scanned the room.

‘Hmm,’ he said when he had finished looking. ‘This is more serious than I thought. She's taken down all her old paintings. And the new ones don't look like her work at all.’

‘They're not. You humiliated her.’

‘And yet she seems to have done up the stage since I last saw it. New paint job or something.’

The so-called stage to which Quisser referred was a small platform in the opposite corner of the club. This area was entirely framed by four long panels, each of them painted with black and gold sigils against a glossy red background. Various events occurred on this stage: poetry readings, tableaux vivants, playlets of sundry types, puppet shows, artistic slideshows, musical performances, and so on. That night, which was a Tuesday, the stage was dark. I observed nothing different about it and asked Quisser what he imagined he thought was new.

‘I can't say exactly, but something seems to have been done. Maybe it's those black and gold ideographs or whatever they're supposed to be. The whole thing looks like the cover of a menu in a Chinese restaurant.’

‘You're quoting yourself,’ I said.

‘What do you mean?’

‘The Chinese menu remark. You used that in your review of the Marsha Corker exhibit last month.’

‘Did I? I don't remember.’

‘Are you just saying you don't remember, or do you really not remember?’ I asked this question in the spirit of trivial curiosity, my queasy stomach discouraging the strain of any real antagonism on my part.

‘I remember, all right? Which reminds me, there's something I wanted to talk to you about. It came to me the other day, and I immediately thought of you and your… stuff,’ he said, gesturing toward my notebook of writings open on the table between us. ‘I can't believe it's never come up before.

You of all people should know about them. No one else seems to. It was years ago, but you're old enough to remember them. You've got to remember them.'

'Remember what?' I asked, and after the briefest pause he replied:

'The gas station carnivals.'

And he said these words as if he were someone delivering a punchline to a joke, the proud bringer of a surprising and profound hilarity. I was supposed to express an astonished recognition, that much I knew. It was not a phenomenon of which I was entirely ignorant, and memory is such a tricky thing. This, at least, is what I told Quisser. But as Quisser told me his memories, trying to arouse mine, I gradually realized the true nature and purpose of the so-called gas station carnivals. During this time it was all I could do to conceal how badly my stomach was acting up on me, queasy and burning. I kept telling myself, as Quisser was talking about his memories of the gas station carnivals, that I was certainly experiencing the onset of a virus, if in fact I had not been the victim of food poisoning. Quisser, nevertheless, was so caught up in his story that he seemed not to notice my agony.

Quisser said that his recollections of the gas station carnivals derived from his early childhood. His family, meaning his parents and himself, would go on long vacations by car, often driving great distances, to a variety of destinations. Along the way, naturally, they would need to stop at any number of gas stations that were located in towns and cities, as well as those that they came upon in more isolated, rural locales. These were the places, Quisser said, where one was

most likely to discover those hybrid enterprises which he called gas station carnivals.

Quisser did not claim to know when or how these specialized carnivals, or perhaps specialized gas stations, came into existence, nor how widespread they might have been. His father, whom Quisser believed would be able to answer such questions, had died some years ago, while his mother was no longer mentally competent, having suffered a series of psychic catastrophes not long after the death of Quisser's father. Thus, all that remained to Quisser was the memory of these childhood excursions with his parents, during which they would find themselves in some rural area, perhaps at the crossroads of two highways (and often, he seemed to recall, around sunset), and discover in this isolated location one of those curiosities which he described to me as gas station carnivals.

They were invariably filling stations, Quisser emphasized, and not service stations, which might have facilities for doing extensive repairs on cars and other vehicles. There would be, in those days, four gas pumps at most, often only two, and some kind of modest building which usually had so many signs and advertisements applied to its exterior that no one could say if anything actually stood beneath them. Quisser said that as a child he always took special notice of the signs that advertised chewing tobacco, and that as an adult, in his capacity as an art critic, he still found the sight of chewing-tobacco packages very appealing, and he could not understand why some artist had not successfully exploited their visual and imaginative qualities. It seemed to me, as we sat that night in the Crimson Cabaret, that this chewing-tobacco material was intended to lend greater cre-

dence to Quisser's story. This detail was so vivid to him. But when I asked Quisser if he recalled any particular brands of chewing tobacco being advertised at these filling stations which had carnivals attached to them, he became slightly defensive, as if my question were intended to challenge the accuracy of his childhood recollection. He then shifted the focus of the issue I had raised by asserting that the carnival aspect of these places was not exactly attached to the gas station aspect, but that they were never very far away from each other and there was definitely a commercial liaison between them. His impression, which had been instilled in him like some founding principle of a dream, was that a substantial purchase of gasoline allowed the driver and passengers of a given vehicle free access to the nearby carnival.

At this point in his story Quisser became anxious to explain that these gas station carnivals were by no means elaborate—quite the opposite, in fact. Situated on some empty stretch of land that stood alongside, or sometimes behind, a rural filling station, they consisted of only the remnants of fully fledged carnivals, the bare bones of much larger and grander entertainments. There was usually a tall, arched entranceway with colored lightbulbs that provided an eerie contrast to the vast and barren landscape surrounding it. Especially around sunset, which was usually, or possibly always, when Quisser and his parents found themselves in one of these remote locales, the colorful illumination of a carnival entranceway created an effect that was both festive and sinister. But once a visitor had gained admittance to the actual grounds of the carnival, there came a moment of letdown at the thing itself—that spare assemblage of equip-

ment that appeared to have been left behind by a travelling amusement park in the distant past.

There were always only a few carnival rides, Quisser said, and these were very seldom in actual operation. He supposed that at some time they had been in functioning order, probably when they were first installed as an annex to the gas stations. But this period, he speculated, could not have lasted long. And no doubt at the earliest sign of malfunction each of the rides had been shut down. Quisser said that he himself had never been on a single ride at a gas station carnival, though he insisted that his father once allowed him to sit atop one of the wooden horses on a defunct merry-go-round. 'It was a miniature merry-go-round,' Quisser told me, as if that gave his recollected experience an aura of meaning or substance. All the rides, it seemed, were miniature, he asserted—small-scale versions of carnival rides he had elsewhere known and had actually ridden upon. Beside the miniature merry-go-round, which never moved an inch and always stood dark and silent in a remote rural landscape, there would be a miniature ferris wheel (no taller than a bungalow-style house, Quisser said), and sometimes a miniature tilt-a-whirl or a miniature roller coaster. And they were always closed down because once they had malfunctioned, if in fact any of them were ever in operation, they were never subsequently repaired. Possibly they never could be repaired, Quisser thought, given the antiquated parts and mechanisms of these miniature carnival rides.

Yet there was a single, quite crucial amusement that one could almost always expect to see open to the public, or at least to those whose car had been filled with the requisite amount of gasoline and who were therefore free to pass

through the brightly lit entranceway upon which the word carnival was emblazoned in colored lights against a vast and haunting sky at sundown somewhere out in a rural wasteland. Quisser posed to me a question: how could a place advertise itself as a carnival, even a gas station carnival, if it did not include that most vital carnivalesque feature—a sideshow? Perhaps there was some special law or ordinance regulating such matters, Quisser imagined out loud, an old statute of some kind that would have particular force in remote areas where certain traditions have an endurance unknown to urban centers. This would account for the fact that, except under extraordinary circumstances (such as dangerously bad weather), there was always some type of sideshow performance at these gas station carnivals, even though everything else on the grounds stood dark and damaged.

Of course these sideshows, as Quisser described them, were not terribly sophisticated, even by the standards of the average carnival, let alone those that served as commercial enticements for some out-of-the-way gas station. There would be only a single sideshow attraction at a given site, and outwardly they each presented the same image to the carnival's patrons: a small tent of torn and filthy canvas. At some point along the perimeter of the tent would be a loose flap of material through which Quisser and his parents, though sometimes only Quisser himself, would gain entrance to the sideshow. Inside the tent were a few wooden benches that had sunk a little bit into the hard dirt beneath them and, some distance away, a small stage area that was raised perhaps just a foot or so above ground level. Illumination was provided by two ordinary floor lamps—one on

either side of the stage—that were without lampshades or any other kind of covering, so that their bare lightbulbs burned harshly and cast dramatic shadows throughout the interior of the tent. Quisser said that he always noticed the frayed electrical cords that trailed off from the base of each lamp and, by means of several extension cords, ultimately found a source of power at the gas station—that is, from within the small brick building which was obscured by so many signs advertising chewing tobacco and other products.

When visitors to a gas station carnival entered the sideshow tent and took their places on one of the benches in front of the stage, they were not usually alerted to the particular nature of the performance or spectacle that they would witness. Quisser remarked that there was no marquee or billboard of any type that might offer such a notice to the carnival-goers either before they entered the sideshow tent or after they were inside and seated on one of the old wooden benches. However, with one important exception, each of the performances, or spectacles, was much the same rigmarole. The audience would settle itself on the wooden benches, most of which were about to collapse or (as Quisser observed) were so unevenly sunk into the ground that it was impossible to sit on them, and the show would begin.

The attractions varied from sideshow to sideshow, and Quisser said he was unable to remember all of the ones he had seen. He did recall what he described as the Human Spider. This was a very brief spectacle during which someone in a clumsy costume scuttled from one side of the stage to the other and back again, exiting through a slit at the back of the tent. The person wearing the costume, Quisser added, was presumably the attendant who pumped gas,

washed windows, and performed various services around the filling station. In many sideshow performances, such as that of the Hypnotist, Quisser remembered that a gas station attendant's uniform (greasy gray or blue coveralls) was quite visible beneath the performer's stage clothes. Quisser did admit that he was unsure why he designated this particular sideshow act the ‘Hypnotist,’ since there was no hypnotism involved in the performance, and of course no marquee or billboard existed either outside the tent or within it that might lead the public to expect any kind of mesmeric routines. The performer was simply clothed in a long, loose overcoat and wore a plastic mask, which was a plain, very pale replica of a human face, with the exception that instead of eyes (or eyeholes) there were two large discs with spiral designs painted upon them. The Hypnotist would gesticulate chaotically in front of the audience for some moments, no doubt because his vision was obscured by the spiral-patterned discs over the eyes of his mask, and then stumble offstage.

There were numerous other sideshow acts that Quisser claimed to have seen, including the Dancing Puppet, the Worm, the Hunchback, and Dr Fingers. With one important exception, the routine was always the same: Quisser and his parents would enter the sideshow tent and sit upon one of the rotted benches, soon after which some performer would appear briefly on the small stage that was lit up by two ordinary floor lamps. The single deviation from this routine was an attraction that Quisser called the Showman.

Whereas every other sideshow act began and ended after Quisser and his parents had entered the special tent and seated themselves, the one called the Showman always

seemed to be in progress. As soon as Quisser stepped inside the tent—invariably preceding his parents, he claimed—he saw the figure standing perfectly still upon the small stage with his back to the audience. For whatever reason, there were never any other patrons when Quisser and his parents stopped at twilight and visited one of these gas station carnivals—with their second-hand, defective amusements—eventually making their way into the sideshow tent. This situation did not seem strange or troubling to the young Quisser except on those occasions when he entered the sideshow tent and saw that it was the Showman onstage with his back to a few rows of empty benches that looked as if they might break up altogether if one attempted to sit on them. Whenever faced with this scene, Quisser immediately wanted to turn around and leave the place. But then his parents would come pushing into the tent behind him, he said, and before he knew it they would all be sitting on one of the benches in the very first row looking at the Showman. His parents never knew how terrified he was of this peculiar sideshow figure, Quisser repeated several times. Furthermore, visiting these gas station carnivals, and especially taking in the sideshows, was all done for Quisser's benefit, since his father and mother would have preferred simply filling up the family car with gasoline and moving on toward whatever vacation spot was next on their itinerary.

Quisser contended that his parents actually enjoyed watching him sit in terror before the Showman, until he could not stand it any longer and asked to go back to the car. At the same time he was quite transfixed by the sight of this sideshow character, who was unlike any other he could remember. There he was, Quisser said, standing with his back

to the audience and wearing an old top hat and a long cape that touched the dirty floor of the small stage on which he stood. Sticking out from beneath the top hat were the dense and lengthy shocks of the Showman's stiff red hair, Quisser said, which looked like some kind of sickening vermin's nest. When I asked Quisser if this hair might actually have been a wig, deliberately testing his memory and imagination, he gave me a contemptuous look, as if to stress that I was not the one who had seen the stiff red hair; he was the one who had seen it sticking out from beneath the Showman's old top hat. The only other features that were visible to the audience, Quisser continued, were the fingers of the Showman which grasped the edges of his long cape. These fingers appeared to Quisser to be somehow deformed, curling together into little claws, and were a pale greenish color. Apparently, as Quisser viewed it, the entire stance of the figure was calculated to suggest that at any moment he might twirl about and confront the audience full-face, his moldy fingers lifting up the edges of his cape, reaching to the height of his stiff red hair. Yet the figure never budged. Sometimes it did seem to Quisser that the Showman was moving his head a little to the left or a little to the right, threatening to reveal one side of his face or the other, playing a horrible game of peek-a-boo. But ultimately Quisser concluded that these perceived movements were illusory and that the Showman was always posed in perfect stillness, a nightmarish mannikin that invited all kinds of imaginings by its very forbearance of any gesture.

'It was all a nasty pretense,' Quisser said to me and then paused to finish off his glass of wine.

‘But what if he had turned around to face the audience?’ I asked. While awaiting his response, I sipped some of my mint tea, which did not seem to be doing much good for my queasy stomach, yet at the same time was causing no harm either. I lit one of the mild cigarettes that I was smoking on that occasion. ‘Did you hear what I said?’ I said to Quisser, who had been looking toward the stage located in the opposite corner of the Crimson Cabaret. ‘The stage is the same,’ I said to Quisser quite sternly, attracting some glances from persons sitting at the other tables in the club. ‘The panels are the same and the designs on them are also the same.’

Quisser played nervously with his empty wine glass. ‘When I was very young,’ he said, ‘there were certain occasions on which I would see the Showman, but he wasn't in his natural habitat, so to speak, of the sideshow tent.’

‘I think I've heard enough tonight,’ I interjected, my hand pressing against my queasy stomach.

‘What are you saying?’ asked Quisser. ‘You remember them, don't you? The gas station carnivals. Maybe just a faint memory. I was sure you would be the one to know about them.’

‘I think I can say,’ I said to Quisser, ‘I've heard enough of your gas station carnival story to know what it's all about.’

‘What do you mean, “what it's all about”?’ asked Quisser, who was still looking over at the small stage across the room.

‘Well, for one thing, your later memories, your purported memories, of that Showman character. You were about to tell me that throughout your childhood you repeatedly saw this figure at various times and in various places. Perhaps you saw him in the distance of a schoolyard, standing with

his back to you. Or you saw him on the other side of a busy street, but when you crossed the street he wasn't there any longer.'

'Something like that, yes.'

'And you were then going to tell me that lately you've been seeing this figure, or faint suggestions of this figure—sketchy reflections in store windows along the sidewalk, flashing glimpses in the rear-view mirror of your car.'

'It's very much like one of your stories.'

'In some ways it is,' I said, 'and in some ways it isn't. You feel that if you ever see the Showman figure turn his head around to look at you... that something terrible will happen, most likely that you'll perish on the spot from some kind of monumental shock.'

'Yes,' agreed Quisser. 'An unsustainable horror. But I haven't told you the strangest part. You're right that lately I have had glimpses of... that figure, and I did see him during my childhood, outside of the sideshow tent, I mean. But the strangest part is that I remember seeing him in other places even before I first saw him at the gas station carnivals.'

'This is just my point,' I said.

'What is?'

'That there are no gas station carnivals. There never were any gas station carnivals. Nobody remembers them because they never existed. The whole idea is preposterous.'

'But my parents were there with me.'

'Exactly—your dead father and your mentally incompetent mother. Do you remember ever discussing with them your vacation experiences at these special gas stations with the carnivals supposedly annexed to them?'

'No, I don't.'

‘That's because you never went to any such places with them. Think about how ludicrous it all sounds. That there should be filling stations out in the sticks that entice customers with free admission to broken-down carnivals—it's all so ridiculous. Miniature carnival rides? Gas station attendants doubling as sideshow performers?’

‘Not the Showman,’ interrupted Quisser. ‘He was never a gas station attendant.’

‘No, of course he wasn't a gas station attendant, because he was a delusion. The whole thing is an outrageous delusion, but it's also a very particular type of delusion.’

‘And what type would that be?’ asked Quisser, who was still sneaking glances at the stage area across the room of the Crimson Cabaret.

‘It's not some type of common psychological delusion, if that's what you were thinking I was about to say. I have no interest at all in such things. But I am very interested when someone is suffering from a magical delusion. Even more precisely, I am interested in delusions that are a result of art-magic. And do you know how long you've been under the influence of this art-magic delusion?’

‘You've lost me,’ said Quisser.

‘It's simple,’ I said. ‘How long have you imagined all this nonsense about the gas station carnivals, and specifically about this character you describe as the Showman?’

‘I guess it would be more or less absurd at this point to insist to you that I've seen this figure since childhood, even if that's exactly how it seems and that's exactly what I remember.’

‘Of course it would be absurd, because you're definitely delusional.’

‘So I'm delusional about the Showman, but you're not delusional about… what do you call it?’

‘Art-magic. For as long as you've been a victim of this particular art-magic, this is how long you've been delusional about the gas station carnivals and all related phenomena.’

‘And how long is that?’ asked Quisser.

‘Since you humiliated the crimson woman by calling her a deluded no-talent. I told you that she had connections you knew absolutely nothing about.’

‘I'm talking about something from my childhood, something I've remembered my entire life. You're talking about a matter of days.’

‘That's because a matter of days is exactly the term that you've been delusional. Don't you see that through her art-magic she has caused you to suffer from the worst kind of delusion, which might be called a retroactive delusion. And it's not only you who's been afflicted in the past days and weeks and even months. Everyone around here has sensed the threat of this art-magic for some time now. I'm beginning to think that I've found out about it too late myself, much too late. You know what it is to suffer from a delusion of the retroactive type, but do you know what it's like to be the victim of a severe stomach disorder? I've been sitting here in the crimson woman's club drinking mint tea served by a waitress who is the crimson woman's friend, thinking that mint tea is just the thing for my stomach when it very well may be aggravating my condition or even causing it to transform, in accordance with the principles of art-magic, into something more serious and more strange. But the crimson woman is not the only one practising this art-magic. It's happening everywhere around here. It drifted in un-

expectedly like a fog at sea, and so many of us are becoming lost in it. Look at the faces in this room and then tell me that you alone are the victim of a horrible art-magic. The crimson woman has quite a few adversaries, just as she is connected with powerful allies. How can I say exactly who they are —some group specializing in art-magic, no doubt, but I can't just say, with a fatuous certainty, "Yes, it must be some particular gang of illuminati," or esoteric scientists, as so many have begun styling themselves these days.'

'But it all sounds like one of your stories,' Quisser protested.

'Of course it does, don't you think she knows that? But I'm not the one with that grotesque yarn about the gas station carnivals and the sideshow tent with a small stage not unlike the stage on the opposite side of this room. You can't keep your eyes off it, I can see that and so can the other people around the room. And I know what you think you're seeing over there.'

'Assuming you know what you're talking about,' said Quisser, who was now forcing himself to look away from the stage area across the room, 'what am I supposed to do about it?'

'You can start by keeping your eyes off that stage across the room. There's nothing you can see over there except an art-magic delusion. There is nothing necessarily fatal or permanent about the affliction. But you must believe that you will recover, just as you would if you were suffering from some non-fatal physical disease. Otherwise these delusions may turn into something far more deadly, on either a physical level or a psychic level, or both. Take my advice, as someone who dabbles in tales of extraordinary doom, and

walk away from all of this madness. There are enough fatalities of a mundane sort. Find a quiet place and wait for one of them to carry you off.'

I could now see that the intense conviction carried by my words had finally had its effect on Quisser. His gaze was no longer drawn toward the small stage on the opposite side of the room but was directed full upon me. He did remain somewhat distraught in the face of the truth about his delusion, yet he seemed to have settled down considerably.

I lit another of my mild cigarettes and glanced around the room, not looking for anything or anyone in particular but merely gauging the atmosphere. The tobacco smoke drifting through the club was so much thicker, the amber light several shades darker, and the sound of raindrops still played against the black painted windows of the Crimson Cabaret. I was now back in the cabin of that old ship as it was being cast about in a vicious storm at sea, utterly insecure in its bearings and profoundly threatened by uncontrollable forces. Quisser excused himself to go to the rest room, and his form passed across my field of vision like a shadow through dense fog.

I have no idea how long Quisser was gone from the table. My attention became fully absorbed by the other faces in the club and the deep anxiety they betrayed to me, an anxiety that was not of the natural, existential sort but one that was caused by peculiar concerns of an uncanny nature. What a season is upon us, these faces seemed to say. And no doubt their voices would have spoken directly of certain peculiar concerns had they not been intimidated into weird equivocations and double entendres by the fear of falling victim to the same kind of unnatural affliction that had made so much

trouble in the mind of the art critic Stuart Quisser. Who would be next? What could a person say these days, or even think, without feeling the dread of repercussion from powerfully connected groups and individuals? I could almost hear their voices asking, 'Why here, why now?' But of course they could have just as easily been asking, 'Why not here, why not now?' It would not occur to this crowd that there were no special rules involved; it would not occur to them, even though they were a crowd of imaginative artists, that the whole thing was simply a matter of random, purposeless terror that converged upon a particular place at a particular time for no particular reason. On the other hand, it would also not have occurred to them that they might have wished it all upon themselves, that they might have had a hand in bringing certain powerful forces and connections into our district simply by wishing them to come. They might have wished and wished for an unnatural evil to fall upon them but, for a while at least, nothing happened. Then the wishing stopped, the old wishes were forgotten yet at the same time gathered in strength, distilling themselves into a potent formula (who can say!), until one day the terrible season began. Because had they really told the truth, this artistic crowd might also have expressed what a sense of meaning (although of a negative sort), not to mention the vigorous thrill (although of an excruciating type), this season of unnatural evil had brought to their lives. What does it mean to be alive except to court disaster and suffering at every moment? For every diversion, for every thrill our born nature requires in this carnival world, even to the point of apocalypse, there are risks to be taken. No one is safe, not even art-magicians or esoteric scientists, who are the most

deluded among us because they are the most tempted by amusements of an uncanny and unnatural kind, fumbling as any artist or scientist does with the inherent chaos of things. It was during the moments that I was looking at all the faces in the Crimson Cabaret, and thinking my own thoughts about those faces, that a shadow again passed across my foggy field of vision. While I expected to find that this shadow was Quisser, my table companion for that evening, on the way back from his trip to the rest room, I instead found myself confronted by the waitress who Quisser had claimed was so loyal to the crimson woman. She asked if I wanted to order yet another cup of mint tea, saying it in exactly these words, yet another cup of mint tea. Trying not to become irritated by her queerly sarcastic tone of voice, which would only have further aggravated my already queasy stomach, I answered that I was just about to leave for the night. Then I added that perhaps my friend wanted to drink yet another glass of wine, pointing across the table to indicate the empty glass Quisser had left behind when he excused himself to use the rest room. But there was no empty wine glass across the table; there was only my empty cup of mint tea. I immediately accused the waitress of taking away the empty wine glass while I was distracted by my reverie upon the faces in the Crimson Cabaret. But she denied ever serving any glass of wine to anyone at my table, insisting that I had been alone from the moment I arrived at the club and sat down at the table across the room from the small stage area. After a thorough search of the rest room, I returned and tried to find someone else in the club who had seen the art critic Quisser talking to me at great length about

his gas station carnivals. But all of them said they had seen no one of the kind.

Even Quisser himself, when I tracked him down the next day to a hole-in-the-wall art gallery, maintained that he had not seen me the night before. He said that he had spent the entire evening at home by himself, claiming that he had suffered some indisposition—some bug, he said—from which he had since fully recovered. When I called him a liar, he stepped right up to me as we stood in the middle of that hole-in-the-wall art gallery, and in a tense whisper he said that I should 'Watch my words.' I was always shooting off my mouth, he said, and in the future I should use more discretion in what I said and to whom I said it. He then asked me if I really thought it was wise to open my mouth at a party and call someone a deluded no-talent. There were certain persons, he said, that had powerful connections, and I, of all people, he said, should know better, considering my awareness of such things and the way I displayed this awareness in the stories I wrote. 'Not that I disagreed with what you said about you-know-who,' he said. 'But I would not have made such an open declaration. You humiliated her. And these days such a thing can be very perilous, if you know what I mean.'

Of course I did know what he meant, though I did not yet understand why he was now saying these words to me, rather than I to him. Was it not enough, I later thought, that I was still suffering a terrible stomach disorder? Did I also have to bear the burden of another's delusion? But even this explanation eventually fell to pieces upon further inquiry. The stories multiplied about the night of that party, accounts proliferated among my acquaintances and peers concerning

exactly who had committed the humiliating offence and even who had been the offended party. ‘Why are you telling me these things?’ the crimson woman said to me when I proffered my deepest apologies. ‘I barely know who you are. And besides, I've got enough problems of my own. That bitch of a waitress here at the club has taken down all my paintings and replaced them with her own.’

All of us had problems, it seemed, whose sources were untraceable, crossing over one another like the trajectories of countless raindrops in a storm, blending to create a fog of delusion and counter-delusion. Powerful forces and connections were undoubtedly at play, yet they seemed to have no faces and no names, and it was anybody's guess what we—a crowd of deluded no-talents—could have possibly done to offend them. We had been caught up in a season of hideous magic from which nothing could offer us deliverance. More and more I found myself returning to those memories of gas station carnivals, seeking an answer in the twilight of remote rural areas where miniature merry-go-rounds and ferris wheels lay broken in a desolate landscape.

But there is no one here who will listen even to my most abject apologies, least of all the Showman, who may be waiting behind any door (even that leading to the rest room of the Crimson Cabaret). And any room that I enter may become a sideshow tent where I must take my place upon a rickety old bench on the verge of collapse. Even now the Showman stands before my eyes. His stiff red hair moves a little toward one shoulder, as if he is going to turn his gaze upon me, and moves back again; then his head moves a little toward the other shoulder in this never-ending game of horrible peek-a-boo. I can only sit and wait, knowing that one

day he will turn full around, step down from his stage, and claim me for the abyss I have always feared. Perhaps then I will discover what it was I did—what any of us did—to deserve this fate.

Severini (2007 Teatro Grottesco Version)

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I was the only one among a local circle of acquaintances and associates who had never met Severini. Unlike the rest of them I was not in the least moved to visit him along with the others at that isolated residence which had become known as ‘Severini's Shack.’ There was a question of my deliberately avoiding an encounter with this extraordinary individual, but even I myself had no idea whether or not this was true. My curiosity was just as developed as that of the rest of them, more so in fact. Yet some kind of scruple or special anxiety kept me away from what the others celebrated as the ‘spectacle of Severini.’

Of course I could not escape a second-hand knowledge of their Severini visits. Each of these trips to that lonesome hovel some distance outside the city where I used to live was a great adventure, they reported, an excursion into the most obscure and idiosyncratic nightmares. The figure that presided over these salon-like gatherings was extremely unstable and inspired in his visitors a sense of lurid anticipation, an unfocused expectation that sometimes reached the pitch of lunacy. Afterward I would hear detailed accounts from one person or another of what had occurred during a particular evening within the confines of the notorious

shack, which was situated at the edge of a wildly overgrown and swampy tract of land known as St Alban's Marsh, a place that some claimed had a sinister pertinence to Severini himself. Occasionally I would make notes of these accounts, indulging myself in a type of imaginative and also highly analytical record-keeping. For the most part, however, I simply absorbed all of these Severini anecdotes in a wholly natural and organic fashion, much as I assimilated so many things in the world around me, without any awareness—or even a possibility of awareness—that these things might be nourishing or noxious or purely neutral. From the beginning, I admit, it was my tendency to be highly receptive to whatever someone might have to say regarding Severini, his shack-like home, and the marshy landscape in which he had ensconced himself. Then, during private moments when I returned to the small apartment in which I resided during this period of my life, I would recreate in my imagination the phenomena that had been related to me in conversations held at diverse places and times. It was rare that I actively urged the others to elaborate on any specific aspect of their adventures with Severini, but several times I did betray myself when the subject arose of his past life before he set himself up in a marshland shack.

According to first-hand witnesses (that is, persons who had actually made the pilgrimage to that isolated and crumbling shack), Severini could be quite talkative about his personal history, particularly the motives and events that most directly culminated in his present life. Nevertheless, these persons also admitted that the ‘marvelous hermit’ (Severini) displayed a conspicuous disregard for common facts and for truths of a literal sort. Thus he was often given to speaking

about himself by way of ambiguous parables and metaphors, not to mention outrageous anecdotes, the facts of which always seemed to cancel out one another, as well as outright lies which afterward he himself would sometimes expose as such. But much of the time—and in the opinion of some, all of the time—Severini's speech took the form of total nonsense, as though he were talking in his sleep. Despite these obstacles to both credibility and coherence, all of the individuals who spoke to me on the subject somehow conveyed to my mind a remarkably focused portrait of the hermit Severini, an amalgam of hearsay that attained the status of a potent legend.

This impression of a legendary Severini was no doubt bolstered by what certain persons described as ‘Exhibits from the Imaginary Museum.’ The entourage of visitors to the hermit's dilapidated shack was composed of more or less artistic persons, or at least individuals with artistic leanings, and their exposure to Severini proved a powerful inspiration that resulted in numerous artworks in a variety of media and genres. There were sculptures, paintings and drawings, poems and short prose pieces, musical compositions sometimes accompanied by lyrics, conceptual works that existed only in schematic or anecdotal form, and even an architectural plan for a ‘ruined temple on a jungle island somewhere in the region of the Philippines.’ While on the surface these productions appeared to have their basis in a multitude of dubious sources, each of them claimed the most literalistic origins in Severini's own words, his sleeptalking, as they called it. Indeed, I myself could perceive a definite unity among these artworks and their integral relationship to the same unique figure of inspiration that was Severini himself,

although I had never met this fantastical person and had no desire to do so. Nevertheless, these so-called ‘exhibits’ helped me to recreate in my imagination not only those much-discussed visits to that shack in the marsh country but also the personal history of its lone inhabitant.

As I now think about them—that is, recreate them in my imagination—these Severini-based artworks, however varied in their genres and techniques, brought to the surface a few features that were always the same and were always treated in the same way. I was startled when I first began to recognize these common features, because somehow they closely replicated a number of peculiar images and concepts that I myself had already experienced in moments of imaginative daydreaming and especially during episodes of delirium brought on by physical disease or excessive psychic turmoil.

A central element of such episodes was the sense of a place possessing qualities that were redolent, on the one hand, of a tropical landscape, and, on the other hand, of a common sewer. The aspect of a common sewer emerged in the feeling of an enclosed but also vastly extensive space, a network of coiling passages that spanned incredible distances in an underworld of misty darkness. As for the quality of a tropical landscape, this shared much of the same kind of darkly oozing ferment as the sewer aspect, with the added impression of the most exotic forms of life spawning on every side, things multiplying and also incessantly mutating like a time-lapse film of spreading fungus or multicolored slime molds totally unrestricted in their form and expansion. While I experienced the most intense visions of this place, this tropical sewer, as it recreated itself in my de-

lirious imagination year after year, I was always outside it at some great remove, not caught within as if I were having a nightmare. But still I maintained an awareness (as in a nightmare) that something had happened in this place, some unknown event had transpired that had left these images behind it like a trail of slime. And then a certain feeling came over me and a certain concept came to my mind.

It was this feeling and its companion concept that so vividly arose within my being when the others began telling me about their strange visits to the Severini place and showing me the various artworks that this strange individual had inspired them to create. One by one I viewed paintings or sculptures in some artist's studio, or heard music being performed in a club that was frequented by the Severini crowd, or read literary works that were being passed around—and each time the sense of that tropical sewer was revived in me, although not with the same intensity as the delirious episodes I experienced while suffering from a physical disease or during periods of excessive psychic turmoil. The titles of these works alone might have been enough to provoke the particular feeling and the concept that were produced by my delirious episodes. The concept to which I have been referring may be stated in various ways, but it usually occurred to my mind as a simple phrase (or fragment), almost a chant that overwhelmed me with vile and haunting suggestions far beyond its mere words, which are as follows: the nightmare of the organism. The vile and haunting suggestions underlying (or inspired by) this conceptual phrase were, as I have said, called up by the titles of those Severini-based artworks, those Exhibits from the Imaginary Museum. While I have difficulty recalling the type of work to which each title was

attached—whether a painting or a sculpture, a poem or a performance piece—I am still able to cite a number of the titles themselves. One of them that easily emerges in recollection is the following: No Face Among Us. Here is another: Defiled and Delivered. And now many more of them are coming to my mind: The Way of the Lost, On Viscous and Sacred Ground (a.k.a. The Tantric Doctors), In Earth and Excreta, The Black Spume of Existence, Integuments in Eruption, and The Descent into the Fungal. All of these titles, as my artistic acquaintances and associates informed me, were taken from selected phrases (or fragments) spoken by Severini during his numerous episodes of sleeptalking.

Every time I heard one of these titles and saw the particular artwork that it named, I was always reminded of that tropical sewer of my delirious episodes. I would also feel myself on the verge of realizing what it was that had happened in this place, some wonderful or disastrous event that was intimately related to the conceptual phrase which I have given as the nightmare of the organism. Yet these artworks and their titles allowed me only a remote sense of some vile and haunting revelation. And it was simply not possible for the others to illuminate this matter fully, given that their knowledge of Severini's past history was exclusively derived from his own nonsensical or questionable assertions. As nearly as they were willing to speculate, it appeared that this deranged and all-but-incognito person known as Severini was the willing subject of what was variously referred to as an ‘esoteric procedure’ or an ‘illicit practice.’ At this point in my discoveries about the strange Severini I found it difficult to inquire about the exact nature of this procedure, or practice, while at the same time pretending a lack of interest in

actually meeting the resident of that ruined shack out in the marshland backroads some distance outside the city where I used to live. It did seem, however, that this practice or procedure, as nearly as anyone could speculate, was not a medical treatment of any known variety. Rather, they thought that the procedure (or practice) in question involved occult or mystical traditions that, in their most potent form, are able to exist inconspicuously in only a few remaining parts of the world. Of course, all of this speculation could have been a cover-up orchestrated by Severini or by his disciples —for that is what they had become—or by all of them together. In fact, for some time I had suspected that Severini's disciples, despite their parade of artworks and outlandish accounts of their visits to the marshland shack, were nevertheless concealing from me some vital element of their new experiences. There seemed to be some truth of which they had knowledge and I had not. Yet they also seemed to desire that, in due course, I might share with them this truth.

My suspicions of the others' deception derived from a source that was admittedly subjective. This was my imaginative recreation, as I sat in my apartment, of the spectacle of Severini as it was related to me by those who had participated in the visits to his residence in the marsh. In my mind I pictured them seated upon the floor of that small, unfurnished shack, the only illumination being the hectic light of candles that they brought with them and placed in a circle, at the center of which was the figure of Severini. This figure always spoke to them in his uniquely cryptic way, his sleep-talking voice fluctuating in its qualities and even seeming to emanate from places other than his own body, as though he were practising a hyper-ventriloquism. Similarly, his body

itself, as I was told and as I later imagined to myself in my apartment, appeared to react in concert with the fluctuations in his voice. These bodily changes, the others said, were sometimes subtle and sometimes dramatic, but they were consistently ill-defined—not a matter of clear transformation as much as a breakdown of anatomical features and structures, the result being something twisted and tumorous like a living mound of diseased clay or mud, a heap of cancerous matter that slowly thrashed about in the candlelight which illuminated the old shack. These fluctuations in both Severini's voice and his body, the others explained to me, were not in any way under his own guidance but were a totally spontaneous phenomenon to which he submitted as the result of the esoteric procedure or illicit practice worked upon him in some unknown place (possibly 'in the region of the Philippines'). It was now his destiny, the others elaborated, to comply with whatever was demanded of his flesh by what could only be seen as utterly mindless and chaotic forces, and even his consciousness itself—they asserted—was as amorphous and mutable as his bodily form. Yet as they spoke to me about these particulars of Severini's condition, none of them conveyed any real sense of the nightmarish quality of the images and processes they were describing. Awestruck, yes; passionate, yes; somewhat demented, yes. But nightmarish—no. Even as I listened to their account of a given Severini meeting, I too failed to grasp fully their nightmarish qualities and aspects. They would say to me, referring to one of Severini's metamorphoses, 'The naked contours of his form writhed about like a pool of snakes, or twitched like a mass of newly hatched spiderlings.' Nevertheless, upon hearing statement after statement

of this kind I sat relatively undisturbed, accepting without revulsion or outrage these revolting and outrageous remarks. Perhaps, I thought at the time, I was simply under the powerful spell of social decorum, which so often may explain otherwise incomprehensible feelings (or lack of feelings) and behaviors (or lack of behaviors). But once I was alone in my apartment, and began to imaginatively recreate what I had heard about the spectacle of Severini, I was overwhelmed by its nightmarish essence and several times lapsed into one of my delirious episodes with all of its terrible sensations of a tropical sewer and all the nightmares of exotic lifeforms breaking out everywhere like rampant pustules and suppurations. It was this discrepancy between my public response (or lack of response) to the purportedly objective data with which I was being inundated regarding the whole Severini business and my private response (or hyper-response) to this data that ultimately led me to suspect that I was being deceived, even if the deception was as much on my part as it was on the others'. Then I considered that I was not as much the victim of a deception as I was the subject of a manipulation—a process of seduction that would culminate in my entering as a full-fledged initiate into the Severini cult. In either case, it remained my conviction that some vital element had been withheld from me concerning the recluse of St Alban's Marsh until a propitious moment had arrived and I was prepared to confront the truth that was hitherto denied me, or that I was willfully denying to myself.

Finally, on a rainy afternoon, as I was working alone in my apartment (making Severini notes), the buzzer signaled that someone was downstairs. The voice over the intercom belonged to a woman named Carla, who was a sculptress and

whom I barely knew. When I let her in my apartment she was wet from walking in the rain without a coat or umbrella, although her straight black hair and all-black clothes looked very much the same whether wet or dry. I offered her a towel but she refused, saying she 'kind of liked feeling soggy and sickish,' and we went on from there. The reason for her visit to my apartment, she revealed, was to invite me to the first 'collective showing' of the Exhibits from the Imaginary Museum. When I asked why I should be receiving this personal invitation in my apartment on a rainy afternoon, she said: 'Because the showing is going to be at his place, and you've never wanted to go there.' I said that I would think seriously about attending the showing and asked her if that was all she had to say. 'No,' she said as she dug into one of the pockets of her tight damp slacks. 'He was really the one who wanted me to invite you to the exhibit. We never told him about you, but he said that he always felt someone was missing, and for some reason we assumed it was you.' After extracting a piece of paper that had been folded several times, she opened it up and held it before her eyes. 'I wrote down what he said,' she said while holding the limp and wrinkled note close to her face with both hands. Her eyes glanced up at me for a moment over the top edge of the unfolded page (her heavy mascara was running down her cheeks in black rivulets), and then she looked down to read the words Severini had told her to write. 'He says, "You and Severini"—he always calls himself Severini, as if that were someone else—"you and Severini are sympathetic…" something—I can hardly read this. It was dark when I wrote it down. Here we go: "You and Severini are sympathetic organisms."' She paused to push away a few strands of black, rain-

soaked hair that had fallen across her face. She was smiling somewhat idiotically.

'Is that it?' I asked.

'Hold on, he wanted me to get it right. Just one more thing. He said, "Tell him that the way into the nightmare is the way out."' She folded the paper once again and crammed it back into the pocket of her black slacks. 'Does any of that mean anything to you?' she asked.

I said that it meant nothing at all to me. After promising that I would most seriously consider attending the exhibit at Severini's place, I let Carla out of my apartment and back into that rainy afternoon.

I should say that I had never spoken to either Carla or the others about my delirious episodes, with their sensations of a tropical sewer and the emergent concept of the 'nightmare of the organism.' I had never told anyone. I had thought that these episodes and the concept of the nightmare of the organism were strictly a private hell, even one that was unique. Until that rainy afternoon, I had considered it only a coincidence that the artworks inspired by Severini, as well as the titles of these works, served to call up the sensations and suggestions of my delirious episodes. Then I was sent a message by Severini, through Carla, that he and I were 'sympathetic organisms' and that 'the way into the nightmare is the way out.' For some time I had dreamed of being delivered from the suffering of my delirious episodes, and from all the suggestions and sensations that went along with them—the terrible vision that exposed all living things, including myself, as no more than a fungus or a collection of bacteria, a kind of monumental slime mold quivering across the landscape of this planet (and very likely others). Any de-

liverance from such a nightmare, I thought, would involve the most drastic (and esoteric) procedures, the most alien (and illicit) practices. And, ultimately, I never believed that this deliverance, or any other, was really possible. It was simply too good, or too evil, to be true—at least this is how it seemed to my mind. Yet all it took was a few words from Severini, as they reached me through Carla, and I began to dream of all kinds of possibilities. In a moment everything had changed. I now became ready to take those steps toward deliverance; in fact, not to do so seemed intolerable to me. I absolutely had to find a way out of the nightmare, it seemed, whatever procedures or practices were involved. Severini had taken those steps—I was convinced of that—and I needed to know where they had led him.

As might be imagined, I had worked myself into quite a state even before the night of the showing of the Exhibits of the Imaginary Museum. But it was more than my frenzy of dreams and anticipation that affected my experiences that night and now affects my ability to relate what occurred at the tumble-down shack on the edge of St Alban's Marsh. My delirious episodes previous to that night were nothing (that is, they were the perfection of lucidity) when compared to the delirium that overtakes me every time I attempt to sort out what happened at the marshland shack, my thoughts disintegrating little by little until I pass into a kind of sleep-talking of my own. I saw things with my own eyes and other things with other eyes. And everywhere there were voices...

It was all weedy shadows and frogs croaking in the blackness as I walked along the narrow path that, according to the directions given to me, led to Severini's place. I left my car parked alongside the road where I saw the vehicles of the

others. They had all arrived before me, although I was not in the least bit late for this scheduled artistic event. But they had always been anxious, I had long before noticed, whenever a Severini visit was planned, all that day fidgeting with some restless impulse until nightfall came and they could leave the city and go out to St Alban's Marsh.

I expected to see a light ahead as I walked along that narrow path, but all I heard were frogs croaking in the blackness. The full moon in a cloudless sky revealed to me where I should next step along the path leading to the shack at the edge of the marsh. But even before I reached the clearing where the old shack supposedly stood, my sense of everything around me began to change. A warm mist drifted in from either side of the path like a curtain closing in front of my eyes, and I felt something touch my mind with images and concepts that were from elsewhere. 'We are sympathetic organisms,' I heard from the mist. 'Draw closer.' But that narrow path seemed to have no end to it, like those passages in my delirious episodes which extended such great distances in the misty darkness of a tropical landscape, where on every side of me there were exotic forms of life spawning and seething without restraint. I must go to that place, I thought as if these were my own words and not the words of another voice altogether, a voice full of desperate intensity and confused aspirations. 'Calm yourself, Mr Severini, if you insist I still address you by that name. As your therapist I cannot advise you to pursue this route... chasing miracles, if that is what you imagine... this "temple," as you call it, is an escape from any authentic confrontation with...'

But he did find his way to freedom, although without properly being discharged from the institution, and he went

to that place.

'Documentes. Passportas! ' Looking around at those yellow-brown faces, you were finally there. You went to that jungle island, that tropical sewer, a great temple looming out of the misty darkness in your dreams. It rained in every town, the streets streaming like sewers. 'Disentaría,' pronounced the attending physician. But he was not like any of the doctors whom you sought in that place. Amoebic dysentery—there it was, the nightmare continued, so many forms it could take. The way into the nightmare is the way out. And you were willing to follow that nightmare as far as you needed in order to find your way out, just as I was following that narrow path toward your shack on the edge of St Alban's Marsh to enter that same nightmare you had brought back with you. The Exhibits of the Imaginary Museum. Your shack was now a gallery of the nightmares you had inspired in the others with your sleeptalking and the fluctuations of your form, those outrageous miracles which had not outraged anyone. Only when I was alone in my apartment, imaginatively recreating what the others had told me, could I see those miracles as the nightmares they were. I knew this because of my delirious episodes, which none of the others had known. They were the sympathetic organisms, not I. I was antagonistic to you, not sympathetic. Because I would not go into the nightmare, as you had gone. The Temple of Tantric Medicine, this is what you dreamed you would find in that tropical sewer—a place where miracles might happen, where that sect of 'doctors' could minister with the most esoteric procedures and could carry out their illicit practices. But what did you find instead? 'Disentaría,' pronounced the attending physician. Then a small group of those yellow-

brown faces told you, told us, about that other temple which had no name. ‘For the belly sickness,’ they said. Amoebic dysentery, simply another version of the nightmare of the organism from which none of the doctors you had seen in the past could deliver you. ‘How can the disease be cured of itself?’ you asked them. ‘My body—a tumor that was once delivered from the body of another tumor, a lump of disease that is always boiling with its own disease. And my mind—another disease, the disease of a disease. Everywhere my mind sees the disease of other minds and other bodies, these other organisms that are only other diseases, an absolute nightmare of the organism. Where are you taking me!’ you screamed (we screamed) at the yellow-brown faces. ‘Fix the belly sickness. We know, we know.’ They chanted these words along the way, it seemed, as the town disappeared behind the trees and the vines, behind the giant flowers that smelled like rotting meat, and the fungus and muck of that tropical sewer. They knew the disease and the nightmare because they lived in that place where the organism flourished without restraint, its forms so varied and exotic, its fate inescapable. ‘Disentaría,’ pronounced the attending physician. They knew the way through the stonework passages, the walls seeping with slime and soft with mold as they coiled toward the central chamber of the temple without a name. Inside the ruined heart of the temple there were candles burning everywhere; their flickering light revealed an array of temple art and ornamentation. Intricate murals appeared along the walls, mingling with the slime and the mold of that tropical sewer. Sculptures of every size and all shapes projected out of the damp, viscous shadows. At the center of the chamber was a large circular altar, an enormous man-

dala composed of countless jewels, precious stones, or simply bits of glass that gleamed in the candlelight like a pool of multi-colored slime molds.

They laid your body upon the altar; they knew what to do with you (us)—the words to say, the songs to sing, and the esoteric procedures to follow. It was almost as if I could understand the things that they chanted in voices of tortured solemnity. Deliver the self that knows the sickness from the self that does not know. There are two faces which must never confront each other. There is only one body which must struggle to contain them both. And the phantom clutch of that sickness, that amoebic dysentery, seemed to reach me as I walked along that narrow path leading to Severini's shack at the edge of St Alban's Marsh. Inside the shack were all the Exhibits of the Imaginary Museum, the paintings lining the damp wood of the walls and the sculptures projecting out of the shadows cast by the candles which always lighted the single room of that ruined hovel. I had imaginatively recreated the interior of Severini's shack many times according to the accounts related to me by the others about this place and its incredible inhabitant. I imagined how you could forget yourself in such a place, how you could be delivered from the nightmares and delirious episodes that tortured you in other places, even becoming someone else (or something else) as you gave yourself up entirely to the fluctuations of the organism at the edge of St Alban's Marsh. You needed that marsh because it helped you to imaginatively recreate that tropical sewer (where you were taken into the nightmare), and you needed those artworks in order to make the crumbling shack into that temple (where you were supposed to find your way out of the nightmare). But most of all

you needed them, the others, because they were sympathetic organisms. I, on the other hand, was now an antagonistic organism who wanted nothing more to do with your esoteric procedures and illicit practices. Deliver the self that knows the sickness from the self that does not know. The two faces... the one body. You wanted them to enter the nightmare, who did not even know the nightmare as we knew it. You needed them and their artworks to go into the nightmare of the organism to its very end, so that you could find your way out of the nightmare. But you could not go to the very end of the nightmare unless I was with you, I who was now an antagonistic organism without any hope that there was a way out of the nightmare. We were forever divided, one face from the other, struggling within the body—the organism—which we shared.

I never arrived at the shack that night; I never entered it. As I walked along that narrow path in the mist I became feverish. ('Amoebic dysentery,' pronounced the doctor whom I visited the following day.) The face of Severini appeared at the shack that night, not mine. It was always his face that the others saw on such nights when they came to visit. But I was not there with them; that is, my face was not there. His face was the one they saw as they sat among all the Exhibits from the Imaginary Museum. But it was my face which returned to the city; it was my body which I now fully possessed as an organism that belonged to my face alone. But the others never returned from the shack on the edge of St Alban's Marsh. I never saw them again after that night, because on that night he took them with him into the nightmare, with the candle flames flickering upon those artworks and the fluctuations of form which to the others appeared as

a pool of twisting snakes or a mass of spiderlings newly hatched. He showed them the way into the nightmare, but he could not show them the way out. There is no way out of the nightmare once you have gone so far into its depths. That is where he is lost forever, he and the others he has taken with him.

But he did not take me into the marsh with him to exist as a fungus exists or as a foam of multi-colored slime mold exists. That is how I see it in my new delirious episodes. Only at these times when I suffer from a physical disease or excessive psychic turmoil do I see how he exists now, he and the others. Because I never looked directly into the pools of oozing life when I stopped at the shack on the edge of St Alban's Marsh. I was on my way out of the city the night I stopped, and I was only there long enough to douse the place in gasoline and set it ablaze. It burned with all the brilliance of the nightmares that were still exhibited inside, casting its illumination upon the marsh and leaving the most obscure image of what was back there—a vast and vague impression of that great black life from which we have all emerged and of which we are all made.

Teatro Grottesco (2007 Teatro Grottesco Version)

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The first thing I learned was that no one anticipates the arrival of the Teatro. One would not say, or even think, ‘The Teatro has never come to this city—it seems we're due for a visit,’ or perhaps, ‘Don't be surprised when you-know-what turns up. It's been years since the last time.’ Even if the city in which one lives is exactly the kind of place favored by the Teatro, there can be no basis for predicting its appearance. No warnings are given, no fanfare to announce that a Teatro season is about to begin, or that another season of that sort will soon be upon us. But if a particular city possesses what is sometimes called an ‘artistic underworld,’ and if one is in close touch with this society of artists, the chances are optimal for being among those who discover that things have already started. This is the most one can expect.

For a time it was all rumors and lore, hearsay and dreams. Anyone who failed to show up for a few days at the usual club or bookstore or special artistic event was the subject of speculation. But most of the crowd I am referring to led highly unstable, even precarious lives. Any of them might have packed up and disappeared without notifying a single soul. And almost all of the supposedly ‘missing ones’ were, at some point, seen again. One such person was a film-

maker whose short movie Private Hell served as the featured subject of a local one-night festival. But he was nowhere to be seen either during the exhibition or at the party afterward. ‘Gone with the Teatro,’ someone said with a blasé knowingness, while others smiled and clinked glasses in a sardonic farewell toast.

Yet only a week later the filmmaker was spotted in one of the back rows of a pornographic theater. He later explained his absence by insisting he had been in the hospital following a thorough beating at the hands of some people he had been filming who did not consent or desire to be filmed. This sounded plausible, given the subject matter of the man's work. But for some reason no one believed his hospital story, despite the evidence of bandages he was still required to wear. ‘It has to be the Teatro,’ argued a woman who always dressed in shades of purple and who was a good friend of the filmmaker. ‘His stuff and Teatro stuff,’ she said, holding up two crossed fingers for everyone to see.

But what was meant by ‘Teatro stuff’? This was a phrase I heard spoken by a number of persons, not all of them artists of a pretentious or self-dramatizing type. Certainly there is no shortage of anecdotes that have been passed around which purport to illuminate the nature and workings of this ‘cruel troupe,’ an epithet used by those who are too superstitious to invoke the Teatro Grottesco by name. But sorting out these accounts into a coherent profile, never mind their truth value, is another thing altogether.

For instance, the purple woman I mentioned earlier held us all spellbound one evening with a story about her cousin's roommate, a self-styled ‘visceral artist’ who worked the night shift as a stock clerk for a supermarket chain in the

suburbs. On a December morning, about an hour before sun-up, the artist was released from work and began his walk home through a narrow alley that ran behind several blocks of various stores and businesses along the suburb's main avenue. A light snow had fallen during the night, settling evenly upon the pavement of the alley and glowing in the light of a full moon which seemed to hover just at the alley's end. The artist saw a figure in the distance, and something about this figure, this winter-morning vision, made him pause for a moment and stare. Although he had a trained eye for sizing and perspective, the artist found this silhouette of a person in the distance of the alley intensely problematic. He could not tell if it was short or tall, or even if it was moving—either toward him or away from him—or was standing still. Then, in a moment of hallucinated wonder, the figure stood before him in the middle of the alley.

The moonlight illuminated a little man who was entirely unclothed and who held out both of his hands as if he were grasping at a desired object just out of his reach. But the artist saw that something was wrong with these hands. While the little man's body was pale, his hands were dark and were too large for the tiny arms on which they hung. At first the artist believed the little man to be wearing oversized mittens. His hands seemed to be covered by some kind of fuzz, just as the alley in which he stood was layered with the fuzziness of the snow that had fallen during the night. His hands looked soft and fuzzy like the snow, except that the snow was white and his hands were black.

In the moonlight the artist came to see that the mittens worn by this little man were more like the paws of an animal. It almost made sense to the artist to have thought that

the little man's hands were actually paws which had only appeared to be two black mittens. Then each of the paws separated into long thin fingers that wriggled wildly in the moonlight. But they could not have been the fingers of a hand, because there were too many of them. So what appeared to be fingers could not have been fingers, just as the hands were not in fact hands nor the paws really paws—no more than they were mittens. And all of this time the little man was becoming smaller and smaller in the moonlight of that alley, as if he were moving into the distance far away from the artist who was hypnotized by this vision. Finally a little voice spoke which the artist could barely hear, and it said to him: 'I cannot keep them away from me anymore, I am becoming so small and weak.' These words suddenly made this whole winter-morning scenario into something that was too much even for the self-styled 'visceral artist.'

In the pocket of his coat the artist had a tool which he used for cutting open boxes at the supermarket. He had cut into flesh in the past, and, with the moonlight glaring upon the snow of that alley, the artist made a few strokes which turned that white world red. Under the circumstances what he had done seemed perfectly justified to the artist, even an act of mercy. The man was becoming so small.

Afterward the artist ran through the alley without stopping until he reached the rented house where he lived with his roommate. It was she who telephoned the police, saying there was a body lying in the snow at such and such a place and then hanging up without giving her name. For days, weeks, the artist and his roommate searched the local newspapers for some word of the extraordinary thing the police must have found in that alley. But nothing ever appeared.

‘You see how these incidents are hushed up,’ the purple woman whispered to us. ‘The police know what is going on. There are even special police for dealing with such matters. But nothing is made public, no one is questioned. And yet, after that morning in the alley, my cousin and her roommate came under surveillance and were followed everywhere by unmarked cars. Because these special policemen know that it is artists, or highly artistic persons, who are approached by the Teatro. And they know whom to watch after something has happened. It is said that these police may be party to the deeds of that “company of nightmares.”’

But none of us believed a word of this Teatro anecdote told by the purple woman, just as none of us believed the purple woman's friend, the filmmaker, when he denied all innuendos that connected him to the Teatro. On the one hand, our imaginations had sided with this woman when she asserted that her friend, the creator of the short movie Private Hell, was somehow in league with the Teatro; on the other hand, we were mockingly dubious of the story about her cousin's roommate, the self-styled visceral artist, and his encounter in the snow-covered alley.

This divided reaction was not as natural as it seemed. Never mind that the case of the filmmaker was more credible than that of the visceral artist, if only because the first story was lacking the extravagant details which burdened the second. Until then we had uncritically relished all we had heard about the Teatro, no matter how bizarre these accounts may have been and no matter how much they opposed a verifiable truth or even a coherent portrayal of this phenomenon. As artists we suspected that it was in our interest to have our heads filled with all kinds of Teatro crazi-

ness. Even I, a writer of nihilistic prose works, savored the inconsistency and the flamboyant absurdity of what was told to me across a table in a quiet library or a noisy club. In a word, I delighted in the unreality of the Teatro stories. The truth they carried, if any, was immaterial. And we never questioned any of them until the purple woman related the episode of the visceral artist and the small man in the alley.

However, this new disbelief was not in the least inspired by our sense of reason or reality. It was in fact based solely on fear; it was driven by the will to negate what one fears. No one gives up on something until it turns on them, whether or not that thing is real or unreal. In some way all of this Teatro business had finally worn upon our nerves; the balance had been tipped between a madness that intoxicated us and one that began to menace our minds. As for the woman who always dressed herself in shades of purple... we avoided her. It would have been typical of the Teatro, someone said, to use a person like that for their purposes.

Perhaps our judgment of the purple woman was unfair. No doubt her theories concerning the 'approach of the Teatro' made us all uneasy. But was this reason enough to cast her out from that artistic underworld which was the only society available to her? Like many societies, of course, ours was founded on fearful superstition, and this is always reason enough for any kind of behavior. She had been permanently stigmatized by too closely associating herself with something unclean in its essence. Because even after her theories were discredited by a newly circulated Teatro tale, her status did not improve.

I am now referring to a story that was going around in which an artist was not approached by the Teatro but rather

took the first step toward the Teatro, as if acting under the impulse of a sovereign will.

The artist in this case was a photographer of the I-am-a-camera type. He was a studiedly bloodless specimen who quite often, and for no apparent reason, would begin to stare at someone and to continue staring until that person reacted in some manner, usually by fleeing the scene but on occasion by assaulting the photographer, who invariably pressed charges. It was therefore not entirely surprising to learn that he tried to engage the services of the Teatro in the way he did, for it was his belief that this cruel troupe could be hired to, in the photographer's words, ‘utterly destroy someone.’ And the person he wished to destroy was his landlord, a small balding man with a mustache who, after the photographer had moved out of his apartment, refused to remit his security deposit, perhaps with good reason but perhaps not.

In any case, the photographer, whose name incidentally was Spence, made inquiries about the Teatro over a period of some months. Following up every scrap of information, no matter how obscure or suspect, the tenacious Spence ultimately arrived in the shopping district of an old suburb where there was a two-story building that rented space to various persons and businesses, including a small video store, a dentist, and, as it was spelled out on the building's directory, the Theatre Grottesco. At the back of the first floor, directly below a studio for dancing instruction, was a small suite of offices whose glass door displayed some stencilled lettering that read: TG VENTURES. Seated at a desk in the reception area behind the glass door was a young woman with long black hair and black-rimmed eyeglasses. She was

thoroughly engrossed in writing something on a small blank card, several more of which were spread across her desk. The way Spence told it, he was undeterred by all appearances that seemed to suggest the Teatro, or Theatre, was not what he assumed it was. He entered the reception area of the office, stood before the desk of the young woman, and introduced himself by name and occupation, believing it important to communicate as soon as possible his identity as an artist, or at least imply as best he could that he was a highly artistic photographer, which undoubtedly he was. When the young woman adjusted her eyeglasses and asked, 'How can I help you?' the photographer Spence leaned toward her and whispered, 'I would like to enlist the services of the Teatro, or Theatre if you like.' When the receptionist asked what he was planning, the photographer answered, 'To utterly destroy someone.' The young woman was absolutely unflustered, according to Spence, by this declaration. She began calmly gathering the small blank cards that were spread across her desk and, while doing this, explained that TG Ventures was, in her words, an 'entertainment service.' After placing the small blank cards to one side, she removed from her desk a folded brochure outlining the nature of the business, which provided clowns, magicians, and novelty performances for a variety of occasions, their specialty being children's parties.

As Spence studied the brochure, the receptionist placidly sat with her hands folded and gazed at him from within the black frames of her eyeglasses. The light in that suburban office suite was bright but not harsh; the pale walls were incredibly clean and the carpeting, in Spence's description, was conspicuously new and displayed the exact shade of

purple found in turnips. The photographer said that he felt as if he were standing in a mirage. ‘This is all a front,’ Spence finally said, throwing the brochure on the receptionist's desk. But the young woman only picked up the brochure and placed it back in the same drawer from which it had come. ‘What's behind that door?’ Spence demanded, pointing across the room. And just as he pointed at that door there was a sound on the other side of it, a brief rumbling as if something heavy had just fallen to the floor. ‘The dancing classes,’ said the receptionist, her right index finger pointing up at the floor above. ‘Perhaps,’ Spence allowed, but he claimed that this sound that he heard, which he described as having an ‘abysmal resonance,’ caused a sudden rise of panic within him. He tried not to move from where he was standing, but his body was overwhelmed by the impulse to leave that suite of offices. The photographer turned away from the receptionist and saw his reflection in the glass door. She was watching him from behind the lenses of black-framed eyeglasses, and the stencilled lettering on the glass door read backward, as if in a mirror. A few seconds later Spence was outside the building in the old suburb. All the way home, he asserted, his heart was pounding.

The following day Spence paid a visit to his landlord's place of business, which was a tiny office in a seedy downtown building. Having given up on the Teatro, he would have to deal in his own way with this man who would not return his security deposit. Spence's strategy was to plant himself in his landlord's office and stare him into submission with a photographer's unnerving gaze. After he arrived at his landlord's rented office on the sixth floor of what was a thoroughly depressing downtown building, Spence seated

himself in a chair looking across a filthy desk at a small balding man with a mustache. But the man merely looked back at the photographer. To make things worse, the landlord (whose name was Herman Zick) would lean toward Spence every so often and in a quiet voice say, 'It's all perfectly legal, you know.' Then Spence would continue his staring, which he was frustrated to find ineffective against this man Zick, who of course was not an artist, nor even a highly artistic person, as were the usual victims of the photographer. Thus the battle kept up for almost an hour, the landlord saying, 'It's all perfectly legal,' and Spence trying to hold a fixed gaze upon the man he wished to utterly destroy.

Ultimately Spence was the first to lose control. He jumped out of the chair in which he was sitting and began to shout incoherently at the landlord. Once Spence was on his feet, Zick swiftly maneuvered around the desk and physically evicted the photographer from the tiny office, locking him out in the hallway. Spence said that he was in the hallway for only a second or two when the doors opened to the elevator that was directly across from Zick's sixth-floor office. Out of the elevator compartment stepped a middle-aged man in a dark suit and black-framed eyeglasses. He wore a full, well-groomed beard which, Spence observed, was slightly streaked with gray. In his left hand the gentleman was clutching a crumpled brown bag, holding it a few inches in front of him. He walked up to the door of the landlord's office and with his right hand grasped the round black doorknob, jiggling it back and forth several times. There was a loud click that echoed down the hallway of that old downtown building. The gentleman turned his head and looked at

Spence for the first time, smiling briefly before admitting himself to the office of Herman Zick.

Again the photographer experienced that surge of panic he had felt the day before when he visited the suburban offices of TG Ventures. He pushed the down button for the elevator, and while waiting he listened at the door of the landlord's office. What he heard, Spence claimed, was that terrible sound that had sent him running out into the street from TG Ventures, that 'abysmal resonance,' as he defined it. Suddenly the gentleman with the well-groomed beard and black-rimmed glasses emerged from the tiny office. The door to the elevator had just opened, and the man walked straight past Spence to board the empty compartment. Spence himself did not get in the elevator but stood outside, helplessly staring at the bearded gentleman, who was still holding that small crumpled bag. A split second before the elevator doors slid closed, the gentleman looked directly at Spence and winked at him. It was the assertion of the photographer that this wink, executed from behind a pair of black-framed eyeglasses, made a mechanical clicking sound which echoed down the dim hallway. Prior to his exit from the old downtown building, leaving by way of the stairs rather than the elevator, Spence tried the door to his landlord's office. He found it unlocked and cautiously stepped inside. But there was no one on the other side of the door.

The conclusion to the photographer's adventure took place a full week later. Delivered by regular post to his mail box was a small square envelope with no return address. Inside was a photograph. He brought this item to Des Esseintes' Library, a bookstore where several of us were giving a late-night reading of our latest literary efforts. A number

of persons belonging to the local artistic underworld, including myself, saw the photograph and heard Spence's rather frantic account of the events surrounding it. The photo was of Spence himself staring stark-eyed into the camera, which apparently had taken the shot from inside an elevator, a panel of numbered buttons being partially visible along the right-hand border of the picture. ‘I could see no camera,’ Spence kept repeating. ‘But that wink he gave me… and what's written on the reverse side of this thing.’ Turning over the photo Spence read aloud the following handwritten inscription: ‘The little man is so much littler these days. Soon he will know about the soft black stars. And your payment is past due.’ Someone then asked Spence what they had to say about all this at the offices of TG Ventures. The photographer's head swivelled slowly in exasperated negation. ‘Not there anymore,’ he said over and over. With the single exception of myself, that night at Des Esseintes’ Library was the last time anyone would see Spence.

After the photographer ceased to show up at the usual meeting places and special artistic events, there were no cute remarks about his having ‘gone with the Teatro.’ We were all of us beyond that stage. I was perversely proud to note that a degree of philosophical maturity had now developed among those in the artistic underworld of which I was a part. There is nothing like fear to complicate one's consciousness, inducing previously unknown levels of reflection. Under such mental stress I began to organize my own thoughts and observations about the Teatro, specifically as this phenomenon related to the artists who seemed to be its sole objects of attention.

Whether or not an artist was approached by the Teatro or took the initiative to approach the Teatro himself, it seemed the effect was the same: the end of an artist's work. I myself verified this fact as thoroughly as I could. The filmmaker whose short movie Private Hell so many of us admired had, by all accounts, become a full-time dealer in pornographic videos, none of them his own productions. The self-named visceral artist had publicly called an end to those stunts of his which had gained him a modest underground reputation. According to his roommate, the purple woman's cousin, he was now managing the supermarket where he had formerly labored as a stock clerk. As for the purple woman herself, who was never much praised as an artist and whose renown effectively began and ended with the 'cigar box assemblage' phase of her career, she had gone into selling real estate, an occupation in which she became quite a success. This roster of ex-artists could be extended considerably, I am sure of that. But for the purposes of this report or confession (or whatever else you would like to call it) I must end my list of no-longer-artistic persons with myself, while attempting to offer some insights into the manner in which the Teatro Grottesco could transform a writer of nihilistic prose works into a non-artistic, more specifically a post-artistic being.

It was after the disappearance of the photographer Spence that my intuitions concerning the Teatro began to crystallize and become explicit thoughts, a dubious process but one to which I am inescapably subject as a prose writer. Until that point in time, everyone tacitly assumed that there was an intimacy of kind between the Teatro and the artists who were either approached by the Teatro or themselves ap-

proached this cruel troupe by means of some overture, as in the case of Spence, or perhaps by gestures more subtle, even purely noetic (I retreat from writing unconscious, although others might argue with my intellectual reserve). Many of us even spoke of the Teatro as a manifestation of super-art, a term which we always left conveniently nebulous. However, following the disappearance of the photographer, all knowledge I had acquired about the Teatro, fragmentary as it was, became configured in a completely new pattern. I mean to say that I no longer considered it possible that the Teatro was in any way related to a super-art, or to an art of any kind —quite the opposite in fact. To my mind the Teatro was, and is, a phenomenon intensely destructive of everything that I conceived of as art. Therefore, the Teatro was, and is, intensely destructive of all artists and even of highly artistic persons. Whether this destructive force is a matter of intention or is an epiphenomenon of some unrelated, perhaps greater design, or even if there exists anything like an intention or design on the part of the Teatro, I have no idea (at least none I can elaborate in comprehensible terms). Nonetheless, I feel certain that for an artist to encounter the Teatro there can be only one consequence: the end of that artist's work. Strange, then, that knowing this fact I still acted as I did.

I cannot say if it was I who approached the Teatro or vice versa, as if any of that stupidness made a difference. The important thing is that from the moment I perceived the Teatro to be a profoundly anti-artistic phenomenon I conceived the ambition to make my form of art, by which I mean my nihilistic prose writings, into an anti-Teatro phenomenon. In order to do this, of course, I required a penet-

rating knowledge of the Teatro Grottesco, or of some significant aspect of that cruel troupe, an insight of a deeply subtle, even dreamlike variety into its nature and workings.

The photographer Spence had made a great visionary advance when he intuited that it was in the nature of the Teatro to act on his request to utterly destroy someone (although the exact meaning of the statement 'he will know about the soft black stars,' in reference to Spence's landlord, became known to both of us only sometime later). I realized that I would need to make a similar leap of insight in my own mind. While I had already perceived the Teatro to be a profoundly anti-artistic phenomenon, I was not yet sure what in the world would constitute an anti-Teatro phenomenon, nor how in the world I could turn my own prose writings to such a purpose.

Thus, for several days I meditated on these questions. As usual, the psychic demands of this meditation severely taxed my bodily processes, and in my weakened state I contracted a virus, specifically an intestinal virus, which confined me to my small apartment for a period of one week. Nonetheless, it was during this time that things fell into place regarding the Teatro and the insights I required to oppose this company of nightmares in a more or less efficacious manner.

Suffering through the days and nights of an illness, especially an intestinal virus, one becomes highly conscious of certain realities, as well as highly sensitive to the functions of these realities, which otherwise are not generally subject to prolonged attention or meditation. Upon recovery from such a virus, the consciousness of these realities and their functions necessarily fades, so that the once-stricken person may resume his life's activities and not be driven to insanity

or suicide by the acute awareness of these most unpleasant facts of existence. Through the illumination of analogy, I came to understand that the Teatro operated in much the same manner as the illness from which I had recently suffered, with the consequence that the person exposed to the Teatro-disease becomes highly conscious of certain realities and their functions, ones quite different of course from the realities and functions of an intestinal virus. However, an intestinal virus ultimately succumbs, in a reasonably healthy individual, to the formation of antibodies (or something of that sort). But the disease of the Teatro, I now understood, was a disease for which no counteracting agents, or antibodies, had ever been created by the systems of the individuals—that is, the artists—it attacked. An encounter with any disease, including an intestinal virus, serves to alter a person's mind, making it intensely aware of certain realities, but this mind cannot remain altered once this encounter has ended or else that person will never be able to go on living in the same way as before. In contrast, an encounter with the Teatro appears to remain within one's system and to alter a person's mind permanently. For the artist the result is not to be driven into insanity or suicide (as might be the case if one assumed a permanent mindfulness of an intestinal virus) but the absolute termination of that artist's work. The simple reason for this effect is that there are no antibodies for the disease of the Teatro, and therefore no relief from the consciousness of the realities which an encounter with the Teatro has forced upon an artist.

Having progressed this far in my contemplation of the Teatro—so that I might discover its nature or essence and thereby make my prose writings into an anti-Teatro phe-

nomenon—I found that I could go no further. No matter how much thought and meditation I devoted to the subject I did not gain a definite sense of having revealed to myself the true realities and functions that the Teatro communicated to an artist and how this communication put an end to that artist's work. Of course I could vaguely imagine the species of awareness that might render an artist thenceforth incapable of producing any type of artistic efforts. I actually arrived at a fairly detailed and disturbing idea of such an awareness—a world-awareness, as I conceived it. Yet I did not feel I had penetrated the mystery of 'Teatrostuff.' And the only way to know about the Teatro, it seemed, was to have an encounter with it. Such an encounter between myself and the Teatro would have occurred in any event as a result of the discovery that my prose writings had been turned into an anti-Teatro phenomenon: this would constitute an approach of the most outrageous sort to that company of nightmares, forcing an encounter with all its realities and functions. Thus it was not necessary, at this point in my plan, to have actually succeeded in making my prose writings into an anti-Teatro phenomenon. I simply had to make it known, falsely, that I had done so.

As soon as I had sufficiently recovered from my intestinal virus I began to spread the word. Every time I found myself among others who belonged to the so-called artistic underworld of this city I bragged that I had gained the most intense awareness of the Teatro's realities and functions, and that, far from finishing me off as an artist, I had actually used this awareness as inspiration for a series of short prose works. I explained to my colleagues that merely to exist—let alone create artistic works—we had to keep certain things

from overwhelming our minds. However, I continued, in order to keep these things, such as the realities of an intestinal virus, from overwhelming our minds we attempted to deny them any voice whatsoever, neither a voice in our minds nor, certainly, a precise and clear voice in works of art. The voice of madness, for instance, is barely a whisper in the babbling history of art because its realities are themselves too maddening to speak of for very long—and those of the Teatro have no voice at all, given their imponderably grotesque nature. Furthermore, I said, the Teatro not only propagated an intense awareness of these things, these realities and functionings of realities—it was identical with them. And I, I boasted, had allowed my mind to be overwhelmed by all manner of Teatro stuff, while also managing to use this experience as material for my prose writings. 'This,' I practically shouted one day at Des Esseintes' Library, 'is the super-art.' Then I promised that in two days' time I would give a reading of my series of short prose pieces.

Nevertheless, as we sat around on some old furniture in a corner of Des Esseintes' Library, several of the others challenged my statements and assertions regarding the Teatro. One fellow writer, a poet, spoke hoarsely through a cloud of cigarette smoke, saying to me: 'No one knows what this Teatro stuff is all about. I'm not sure I believe it myself.' But I answered that Spence knew what it was all about, thinking that very soon I too would know what he knew. 'Spence!' said a woman in a tone of exaggerated disgust (she once lived with the photographer and was a photographer herself). 'He's not telling us about anything these days, never mind the Teatro.' But I answered that, like the purple woman and

the others, Spence had been overwhelmed by his encounter with the Teatro, and his artistic impulse had been thereby utterly destroyed. ‘And your artistic impulse is still intact,’ she said snidely. I answered that, yes, it was, and in two days I would prove it by reading a series of prose works that exhibited an intimacy with the most overwhelmingly grotesque experiences and gave voice to them. ‘That's because you have no idea what you're talking about,’ said someone else, and almost everyone supported this remark. I told them to be patient, wait and see what my prose writings revealed to them. ‘Reveal?’ asked the poet. ‘Hell, no one even knows why it's called the Teatro Grottesco.’ I did not have an answer for that, but I repeated that they would understand much more about the Teatro in a few days, thinking to myself that within this period of time I would have either succeeded or failed in my attempt to provoke an encounter with the Teatro and the matter of my nonexistent anti-Teatro prose writing would be immaterial.

On the very next day, however, I collapsed in Des Esseintes’ Library during a conversation with a different congregation of artists and highly artistic persons. Although the symptoms of my intestinal virus had never entirely disappeared, I had not expected to collapse the way I did and ultimately to discover that what I thought was an intestinal virus was in fact something far more serious. As a consequence of my collapse, my unconscious body ended up in the emergency room of a nearby hospital, the kind of place where borderline indigents like myself always end up—a backstreet hospital with dated fixtures and a staff of sleepwalkers.

When I next opened my eyes it was night. The bed in which they had put my body was beside a tall paned window that reflected the dim fluorescent light fixed to the wall behind me, creating a black glare in the windowpanes that allowed no view of anything beyond them, only a broken image of myself and the room where I had been assigned for treatment. There was a long row of these tall paned windows and several other beds in the ward, each of them supporting a sleeping body that, like mine, was damaged in some way and therefore had been committed to that backstreet hospital.

I felt none of the extraordinary pain that had caused me to collapse in Des Esseintes' Library. At that moment, in fact, I could feel nothing of the experiences of my past life: it seemed I had always been an occupant of that dark hospital wards and always would be. This sense of estrangement from both myself and everything else made it terribly difficult to remain in the hospital bed where I had been placed. At the same time I felt uneasy about any movement away from that bed, especially any movement that would cause me to approach the open doorway which led into a half-lighted backstreet hospital corridor. Compromising between my impulse to get out of my bed and my fear of moving away from the bed and approaching that corridor, I positioned myself so that I was sitting on the edge of the mattress with my bare feet grazing the cold linoleum floor. I had been sitting on the edge of that mattress for quite a while before I heard the voice out in the corridor.

The voice came over the public address system, but it was not a particularly loud voice. In fact I had to strain my attention for several minutes simply to discern the peculiar qual-

ities of the voice and to decipher what it said. It sounded like a child's voice, a sing-song voice full of taunts and mischief. Over and over it repeated the same phrase—paging Dr Groddeck, paging Dr Groddeck. The voice sounded incredibly hollow and distant, garbled by all kinds of interference. Paging Dr Groddeck, it giggled from the other side of the world.

I stood up and slowly approached the doorway leading out into the corridor. But even after I had crossed the room in my bare feet and was standing in the open doorway, that child's voice did not become any louder or any clearer. Even when I actually moved out into that long dim corridor with its dated lighting fixtures, the voice that was calling Dr Groddeck sounded just as hollow and distant. And now it was as if I were in a dream in which I was walking in my bare feet down a backstreet hospital corridor, hearing a crazy voice that seemed to be eluding me as I moved past the open doorways of innumerable ward full of damaged bodies. But then the voice died away, calling to Dr Groddeck one last time before fading like the final echo in a deep well. At the same moment that the voice ended its hollow outcrying, I paused somewhere toward the end of that shadowy corridor. In the absence of the mischievous voice I was able to hear something else, a sound like quiet, wheezing laughter. It was coming from the room just ahead of me along the right-hand side of the corridor. As I approached this room I saw a metal plaque mounted at eye level on the wall, and the words displayed on this plaque were these: Dr T. Groddeck.

A strangely glowing light emanated from the room where I heard that quiet and continuous wheezing laughter. I peered around the edge of the doorway and saw that the

source of the laughter was an old gentleman seated behind a desk, while the strangely glowing light was coming from a large globular object positioned on top of the desk directly in front of him. The light from this object—a globe of solid glass, it seemed—shone on the old gentleman's face, which was a crazy-looking face with a neatly clipped beard that was pure white and a pair of spectacles with slim rectangular lenses resting on a slender nose. When I moved to stand in the doorway of that office, the eyes of Dr Groddeck did not gaze up at me but continued to stare into the strange, shining globe and at the things that were inside it.

What were these things inside the globe that Dr Groddeck was looking at? To me they appeared to be tiny star-shaped flowers evenly scattered throughout the glass, just the thing to lend a mock-artistic appearance to a common paperweight. Except that these flowers, these spidery chrysanthemums, were pure black. And they did not seem to be firmly fixed within the shining sphere, as one would expect, but looked as if they were floating in position, their starburst of petals wavering slightly like tentacles. Dr Groddeck appeared to delight in the subtle movements of those black appendages. Behind rectangular spectacles his eyes rolled about as they tried to take in each of the hovering shapes inside the radiant globe on the desk before him.

Then the doctor slowly reached down into one of the deep pockets of the lab coat he was wearing, and his wheezing laughter grew more intense. From the open doorway I watched as he carefully removed a small paper bag from his pocket, but he never even glanced at me. With one hand he was now holding the crumpled bag directly over the globe. When he gave the bag a little shake, the things inside the

globe responded with an increased agitation of their thin black arms. He used both hands to open the top of the bag and quickly turned it upside down.

From out of the bag something tumbled onto the globe, where it seemed to stick to the surface. It was not actually adhering to the surface of the globe, however, but sinking into the interior of the glass. It squirmed as those soft black stars inside the globe gathered to pull it down to themselves. Before I could see what it was that they had captured, the show was over. Afterward they returned to their places, floating slightly once again within the glowing sphere.

I looked at Dr Groddeck and saw that he was finally looking back at me. He had stopped his asthmatic laughter, and his eyes were staring frigidly into mine, completely devoid of any readable meaning. Yet somehow these eyes provoked me. Even as I stood in the open doorway of that hideous office in a backstreet hospital, Dr Groddeck's eyes provoked in me an intense outrage, an astronomical resentment of the position I had been placed in. Even as I had consummated my plan to encounter the Teatro and experience its most devastating realities and functions (in order to turn my prose works into an anti-Teatro phenomenon) I was outraged to be standing where I was standing and resentful of the staring eyes of Dr Groddeck. It no longer mattered whether I had approached the Teatro, the Teatro had approached me, or we had both approached each other. I realized that there is such a thing as being approached in order to force one's hand into making what only appears to be an approach, which is actually a non-approach that negates the whole concept of approaching. It was all a fix from the start because I belonged to an artistic underworld, because I was

an artist whose work would be brought to an end by an encounter with the Teatro Grottesco. And so I was outraged by the eyes of Dr Groddeck, which were the eyes of the Teatro, and I was resentful of all the insane realities and the excruciating functions of the Teatro. Although I knew that the persecutions of the Teatro were not exclusively focused on the artists and highly artistic persons of the world, I was nevertheless outraged and resentful to be singled out for special treatment. I wanted to punish those persons in this world who are not the object of such special treatment. Thus, at the top of my voice, I called out in the dim corridor—I cried out the summons for others to join me before the stage of the Teatro. Strange that I should think it necessary to compound the nightmare of all those damaged bodies in that backstreet hospital, as well as its staff of sleepwalkers who moved within a world of outdated fixtures. But by the time anyone arrived Dr Groddeck was gone, and his office became nothing more than a room full of dirty laundry.

My escapade that night notwithstanding, I was soon released from the hospital, even though the results of several tests I had been administered were still pending. I was feeling as well as ever, and the hospital, like any hospital, always needed bed space for more damaged bodies. They said I would be contacted in the next few days.

It was in fact on the following day that I was informed of the outcome of my stay in the hospital. ‘Hello again,’ began the letter, which was typed on a plain, though waterstained sheet of paper. ‘I was so pleased to finally meet you in person. I thought your performance during our interview at the hospital was really first rate, and I am authorized to offer you a position with us. There is an opening in our organiza-

tion for someone with your resourcefulness and imagination. I'm afraid things didn't work out with Mr Spence. But he certainly did have a camera's eye, and we have gotten some wonderful pictures from him. I would especially like to share with you his last shots of the soft black stars, or S.B.S., as we sometimes refer to them. Veritable super-art, if there ever was such a thing!

'By the way, the results of your tests—some of which you have yet to be subjected to—are going to come back positive. If you think an intestinal virus is misery, just wait a few more months. So think fast, sir. We will arrange another meeting with you in any case. And remember—you approached us. Or was it the other way around?

'As you might have noticed by now, all this artistic business can only keep you going so long before you're left speechlessly gaping at the realities and functions of... well, I think you know what I'm trying to say. I was forced into this realization myself, and I'm quite mindful of what a blow this can be. Indeed, it was I who invented the appellative for our organization as it is currently known. Not that I put any stock in names, nor should you. Our company is so much older than its own name, or any other name for that matter. (And how many it's had over the years—The Ten Thousand Things, Anima Mundi, Nethescurial.) You should be proud that we have a special part for you to play, such a talented artist. In time you will forget yourself entirely in your work, as we all do eventually. Myself, I go around with a trunkful of aliases, but do you think I can say who I once was really? A man of the theater, that seems plausible. Possibly I was the father of Faust or Hamlet—or merely Peter Pan.

‘In closing, I do hope you will seriously consider our offer to join us. We can do something about your medical predicament. We can do just about anything. Otherwise, I'm afraid that all I can do is welcome you to your own private hell, which will be as unspeakable as any on earth.’

The letter was signed Dr Theodore Groddeck, and its prognostication of my physical health was accurate: I have taken more tests at the backstreet hospital and the results are somewhat grim. For several days and sleepless nights I have considered the alternatives the doctor proposed to me, as well as others of my own devising, and have yet to reach a decision on what course to follow. The one conclusion that keeps forcing itself upon me is that it makes no difference what choice I make or do not make. You can never anticipate the Teatro—or anything else. You can never know what you are approaching or what is approaching you. Soon enough my thoughts will lose all clarity, and I will no longer be aware that there was ever a decision to be made. The soft black stars have already begun to fill the sky.

The Clown Puppet (2007 Teatro Grottesco Version)

First published in *The Nightmare Factory*, 1996

It has always seemed to me that my existence consisted purely and exclusively of nothing but the most outrageous nonsense. As long as I can remember, every incident and every impulse of my existence has served only to perpetrate one episode after another of conspicuous nonsense, each completely outrageous in its nonsensicality. Considered from whatever point of view—intimately close, infinitely remote, or any position in between—the whole thing has always seemed to be nothing more than some freak accident occurring at a painfully slow rate of speed. At times I have been rendered breathless by the impeccable chaoticism, the absolutely perfect nonsense of some spectacle taking place outside myself, or, on the other hand, some spectacle of equally senseless outrageousness taking place within me. Images of densely twisted shapes and lines arise in my brain. Scribbles of a mentally deranged epileptic, I have often said to myself. If I may allow any exception to the outrageously nonsensical condition I have described—and I will allow none—this single exception would involve those visits which I experienced at scattered intervals throughout my existence, and especially one particular visit that took place in Mr Vizniak's medicine shop.

I was stationed behind the counter at Mr Vizniak's modest establishment very late one night. At that hour there was practically no business at all, none really, given the backstreet location of the shop and its closet-like dimensions, as well as the fact that I kept the place in almost complete darkness both outside and inside. Mr Vizniak lived in a small apartment above the medicine shop, and he gave me permission to keep the place open or close it up as I liked after a certain hour. It seemed that he knew that being stationed behind the counter of his medicine shop at all hours of the night, and in almost complete darkness except for a few lighting fixtures on the walls, provided my mind with some distraction from the outrageous nonsense which might otherwise occupy it. Later events more or less proved that Mr Vizniak indeed possessed a special knowledge and that there existed, in fact, a peculiar sympathy between the old man and myself. Since Mr Vizniak's shop was located on an obscure backstreet, the neighborhood outside was profoundly inactive during the later hours of the night. And since most of the streetlamps in the neighborhood were either broken or defective in some way, the only thing I could see through the small front window of the shop was the neon lettering in the window of the meat store directly across the street. These pale neon letters remained lit throughout the night in the window of the meat store, spelling out three words: beef, pork, goat. Sometimes I would stare at these words and contemplate them until my head became so full of meat nonsense, of beef and pork and goat nonsense, that I had to turn away and find something to occupy myself in the back room of the medicine shop, where there were no windows and thus no possibility of meat-store visions. But once I was in

the back room I would become preoccupied with all the medicines which were stored there, all the bottles and jars and boxes upon boxes stacked from floor to ceiling in an extremely cramped area. I had learned quite a bit about these medicines from Mr Vizniak, although I did not have a license to prepare and dispense them to customers without his supervision. I knew which medicines could be used to most easily cause death in someone who had ingested them in the proper amount and proper manner. Thus, whenever I went into the back room to relieve my mind from the meat nonsense brought on by excessive contemplation of the beef-pork-and-goat store, I almost immediately became preoccupied with fatal medicines; in other words, I would then become obsessed with death nonsense, which is one of the worst and most outrageous forms of all nonsense. Usually I would end up retreating to the small lavatory in the back room, where I could collect myself and clear my head before returning to my station behind the counter of Mr Vizniak's medicine shop.

It was there—behind the medicine shop counter, that is—that I experienced one of those visits, which I might have allowed as the sole exception to the intensely outrageous nonsense of my existence, but which in fact, I must say, were the nadir of the nonsensical. This was my medicine-shop visit, so called because I have always experienced only a single visitation in any given place—after which I begin looking for a new situation, however similar it may actually be to my old one. Each of my situations prior to Mr Vizniak's medicine shop was essentially a medicine-shop situation, whether it was a situation working as a night watchman who patrolled some desolate property, or a situation as a groundskeeper for

a cemetery in some remote town, or a situation in which I spent endless gray afternoons sitting in a useless library or shuffling up and down the cloisters of a useless monastery. All of them were essentially medicine-shop situations, and each of them sooner or later involved a visit—either a monastery visit or a library visit, a cemetery visit or a visit while I was delivering packages from one part of town to another in the dead of the night. At the same time there were certain aspects to the medicine-shop visit that were unlike any of the other visits, certain new and unprecedented elements which made this visit unique.

It began with an already familiar routine of nonsense. Gradually, as I stood behind the counter late one night at the medicine shop, the light radiated by the fixtures along the walls changed from a dim yellow to a rich reddish-gold. I have never developed an intuition that would allow me to anticipate when this is going to happen, so that I might say to myself: 'This will be the night when the light changes to reddish-gold. This will be the night of another visit.' In the new light (the rich reddish-gold illumination) the interior of the medicine shop took on the strange opulence of an old oil painting; everything became transformed beneath a thick veneer of gleaming obscurity. And I have always wondered how my own face appears in this new light, but at the time I can never think about such things because I know what is about to happen, and all I can do is hope that it will soon be over.

After the business with the tinted illumination, only a few moments pass before there is an appearance, which means that the visit itself has begun. First the light changes to reddish-gold, then the visit begins. I have never been able

to figure out the reason for this sequence, as if there might be a reason for such nonsense as these visits or any particular phase of these visits. Certainly when the light changes to a reddish-gold tint I am being forewarned that an appearance is about to occur, but this has never enabled me to witness the actual manifestation, and I had given up trying by the time of the medicine-shop visit. I knew that if I looked to my left, the appearance would take place in the field of vision to my right; conversely, if I focused on the field of vision to my right, the appearance would take place, in no time at all, on my left. And of course if I simply gazed straight ahead, the appearance would take place just beyond the edges of my left or right fields of vision, silently and instantaneously. Only after it had appeared would it begin to make any sound, clattering as it moved directly in front of my eyes, and then, as always happened, I would be looking at a creature that I might say had all the appearances of an antiquated marionette, a puppet figure of some archaic type.

It was almost life-sized and hovered just far enough above the floor of the medicine shop that its face was at the same level as my own. I am describing the puppet creature as it appeared during the medicine-shop visit, but it always took the form of the same antiquated marionette hovering before me in a reddish-gold haze. Its design was that of a clown puppet in pale pantaloons overdraped by a kind of pale smock, thin and pale hands emerging from the ruffled cuffs of its sleeves, and a powder-pale head rising above a ruffled collar. I always found it difficult at first to look directly at the face of the puppet creature whenever it appeared, because the expression which had been created for that face was so simple and bland, yet at the same time so intensely evil and perverse. In

the observation of at least one commentator on puppet theater, the expressiveness of a puppet or marionette resides in its arms, hands, and legs, never in its face or head, as is the case with a human actor. But in the case of the puppet thing hovering before me in the medicine shop, this was not true. Its expressiveness was all in that face with its pale and pitted complexion, its slightly pointed nose and delicate lips, and its dead puppet eyes—eyes that did not seem able to fix or focus themselves upon anything but only gazed with an unchanging expression of dreamy malignance, an utterly nonsensical expression of stupefied viciousness and cruelty. So whenever this puppet creature first appeared I avoided looking at its face and instead looked at its tiny feet which were covered by a pair of pale slippers and dangled just above the floor. Then I always looked at the wires which were attached to the body of the puppet thing, and I tried to follow those wires to see where they led. But at some point my vision failed me; I could visually trace the wires only so far along their neat vertical path... and then they became lost in a thick blur, a ceiling of distorted light and shadow that always formed some distance above the puppet creature's head—and my own—beyond which my eyes could perceive no clear image, nothing at all except a vague sluggish movement, like a layer of dense clouds seen from far away through a gloomy reddish-gold twilight. This phenomenon of the wires disappearing into a blur supported my observation over the years that the puppet thing did not have a life of its own. It was solely by means of these wires, in my view, that the creature was able to proceed through its familiar motions. (The term ‘motions,’ as I bothered myself to discover in the course of my useless research into the sub-

ject, was commonly employed at one time, long ago, to refer to various types of puppets, as in the statement: ‘The motions recently viewed at St Bartholomew's Fair were engaged in antics of a questionable probity before an audience which might have better profited by deep contemplation of the fragile and uncertain destiny of their immortal souls.’) The puppet swung forward toward the counter of the medicine shop behind which I stood. Its body parts rattled loosely and noisily in the late-night quiet before coming to rest. One of its hands was held out to me, its fingers barely grasping a crumpled slip of paper.

Of course I took the tiny page, which appeared to have been torn from an old pad used for writing pharmaceutical prescriptions. I had learned through the years to follow the puppet creature's cues obediently. At one time, years before the visit at the medicine shop, I was crazy or foolish enough to call the puppet and its visits exactly what they were—outrageous nonsense. Right to the face of that clown puppet I said, ‘Take your nonsense somewhere else,’ or possibly, ‘I'm sick of this contemptible and disgusting nonsense.’ But this outburst counted for nothing. The puppet simply waited until my foolhardy craziness had passed and then continued through the motions which had been prepared for that particular visit. So I examined the prescription form the creature had passed across the counter to me, and I noticed immediately that what was written upon it was nothing but a chaos of scrawls and scribbles, which was precisely the sort of nonsense I should have expected during the medicine-shop visit. I knew that it was my part to play along with the clown puppet, although I was never precisely certain what was expected of me. From previous experience I had learned

that it was futile to guess what would eventually transpire during a particular visit, because the puppet creature was capable of almost anything. For example, once it visited me when I was working through the night at a skid-row pawn shop. I told the thing that it was wasting my time unless it could produce an exquisitely cut diamond the size of a yo-yo. Then it reached under its pale smocklike garment and rummaged about, its hand seeking deep within its pantaloons. 'Well, let's see it,' I shouted at the clown puppet. 'As big as a yo-yo,' I repeated. Not only did it come up with an exquisitely cut diamond that was, generally speaking, as large as a yo-yo, but the object that the puppet thing flashed before my eyes—brilliant in the pawn-shop dimness—was also made in the form of a yo-yo... and the creature began to lazily play with the yo-yo diamond right in front of me, spinning it slowly on the string that was looped about one of those pale puppet-fingers, throwing it down and pulling it up over and over while the facets of that exquisitely cut diamond cast a pyrotechnic brilliance into every corner of the pawn shop.

Now, as I stood behind the counter of the medicine shop staring at the scrawls and scribbles on that page torn from an old prescription pad, I knew that it was pointless to test the clown puppet in any way or to attempt to guess what would occur during this particular visit, which would be unlike previous visits in several significant ways. Thus I tried only to play my part, my medicine-shop part, as close as possible to the script that I imagined had already been written, though by whom or what I could have no idea.

'Could you please show me some proper identification?' I asked the creature, while at the same time looking away from its pale and pasty clown face and its dead puppet eyes,

gazing instead through the medicine-shop window and focusing on the sign in the window of the meat store across the street. Over and over I read the words BEEF-PORK-GOAT, BEEF-PORK-GOAT, filling my head with meat nonsense, which was infinitely less outrageous than the puppet nonsense with which I was now confronted. 'I cannot dispense this prescription,' I said while staring out the medicine-shop window. 'Not unless you can produce proper identification.' And all the time I had no idea what to do once the puppet thing reached into its pantaloons and came up with what I requested.

I continued to stare out the medicine-shop window and think about the meat nonsense, but I could still see the clown puppet gyrating in the reddish-gold light, and I could hear its wooden parts clacking against one other as it struggled to pull up something that was cached away inside its pantaloons. With stiff but unerring fingers the creature was now holding what looked like a slim booklet of some kind, waving it before me until I turned and accepted the object. When I opened the booklet and looked inside I saw that it was an old passport, a foreign passport with no words that I recognized save those of its rightful owner: Ivan Vizniak. The address below Mr Vizniak's name was a very old address, because I knew that many years had passed since Mr Vizniak had emigrated from his homeland, opened the medicine shop, and moved into the rooms directly above it. I also noticed that the photograph had been torn away from its designated place in the document belonging to Mr Vizniak.

Nothing like this had ever occurred during one of these puppet visits: no one else had ever been involved in any of

the encounters I had had over the years with the clown puppet, and I was now at a loss for my next move. The only thing that occupied my mind was the fact that Mr Vizniak lived in the rooms above the medicine shop, and here in my hands was his passport, which the puppet creature had given me when I asked it to provide some identification so that I could fill the prescription it had given me, or rather, go through the motions of filling such a prescription, since I had no hope of deciphering the scrawls and scribbles on that old prescription form. And all of this was nothing but the most outrageous nonsense, as I well knew from past experience. I was actually on the verge of committing some explosive action, some display of violent hysterics by which I might bring about an end, however unpleasant, to this intolerable situation. The eyes of the puppet creature were so dark and so dead in the reddish-gold light that suffused the medicine shop; its head was bobbing slightly and also quivering in a way that caused my thought processes to race out of control, becoming all tangled in a black confusion. But exactly at the moment when I approached my breaking point, the head of the puppet thing turned away from me and its eyes seemed to be looking toward the curtained doorway that led to the back room of the medicine shop. Then it began to move in the direction of the curtained doorway, its limbs swinging freely with the sort of spastic and utterly mindless gestures of playfulness that only puppets can make. Nothing like this had ever happened before in the course of the creature's previous visits: it had never left my presence in this manner. And as soon as it disappeared entirely behind the curtain of the doorway leading to the back room, I heard a voice calling

to me from the street outside the medicine shop. It was Mr Vizniak. ‘Open the door,’ he said. ‘Something has happened.’

I could see him through the paned windows of the front door, the eyes of his thin face squinting into the dimness of the medicine shop. With his right hand he kept beckoning, as if this incessant gesturing alone could bring me to open the door for him. Another person is about to enter the place where one of these visits is occurring, I thought to myself. But there seemed to be nothing I could do, nothing I could say, not with the clown puppet only a few feet away in the back room. I stepped around the counter of the medicine shop, unlocked the front door, and let Mr Vizniak inside. As the old man shuffled in I could see that he was wearing an old robe with torn pockets and a pair of old slippers.

‘Everything is all right,’ I whispered to him. And then I pleaded: ‘Go back to bed. We can talk about it in the morning.’

But Mr Vizniak seemed to have heard nothing that I said to him. From the moment he entered the medicine shop he appeared to be in some unusual state of mind. His whole manner had lost the vital urgency he displayed when he was rapping at the door and beckoning to me. He pointed one of his pale, crooked fingers upward and slowly gazed around the shop. ‘The light… the light,’ he said as the reddish-gold illumination shone on his thin, wrinkled face, making it look as if he were wearing a mask that had been hammered out of some strange metal, some ancient mask behind which his old eyes were wide and bright with fear.

‘Tell me what happened,’ I said, trying to distract him. I had to repeat myself several times before he finally responded. ‘I thought I heard someone in my room upstairs,’ he

said in a completely toneless voice. ‘They were going through my things. I thought I might have been dreaming, but I was awake when I heard something going down the stairs. Not footsteps,’ he said. ‘Just something quietly brushing against the stairs. I wasn't sure. I didn't come down right away.’

‘I didn't hear anyone come down the stairs,’ I said to Mr Vizniak, who now seemed lost in a long pause of contemplation. ‘I didn't see anyone on the street outside. You were probably just dreaming. Why don't you go back to bed and forget about everything,’ I said. But Mr Vizniak no longer seemed to be listening to me. He was staring at the curtained doorway leading to the back room of the medicine shop.

‘I have to use the toilet,’ he said while continuing to stare at the curtained doorway.

‘You can go back to your room upstairs,’ I suggested.

‘No,’ he said. ‘Back there. I have to use the toilet.’ Then he began shuffling toward the back room, his old slippers lightly brushing against the floor of the medicine shop. I called to him, very quietly, a number of times, but he continued to move steadily toward the back room, as if he were in a trance. In a few moments he had disappeared behind the curtain.

I thought that Mr Vizniak might not find anything in the back room of the medicine shop. I thought that he might see only the bottles and jars and boxes upon boxes of medicines. Perhaps the visit has already ended, I thought. It occurred to me that the visit could have ended the moment the puppet creature went behind the curtain of the doorway leading to the back room. I thought that Mr Vizniak might return from the back room, after having used the toilet, and go upstairs

again to his rooms above the medicine shop. I thought all kinds of nonsense in the last few moments of that particular visit from the clown puppet.

But in a number of its significant aspects this was unlike any of the previous puppet visits I had experienced. I might even claim that I was not the one whom the puppet creature was visiting on this occasion, or at least not exclusively so. Even though I had always felt that my encounters with the clown puppet were nothing but the most outrageous nonsense, the very nadir of the nonsensical, as I have said, I nonetheless always had the haunting sense of being singled out in some way from all others of my kind, of being cultivated for some special fate. But after Mr Vizniak disappeared behind the curtained doorway I discovered how wrong I had been. Who knows how many others there were who might say that their existence consisted of nothing but the most outrageous nonsense, a nonsense that had nothing unique about it at all and that had nothing behind it or beyond it except more and more nonsense—a new order of nonsense, perhaps an utterly unknown nonsense, but all of it nonsense and nothing but nonsense.

Every place I had been in my life was only a place for puppet nonsense. The medicine shop was only a puppet place like all the others. I came there to work behind the counter and wait for my visit, but I had no idea until that night that Mr Vizniak was also waiting for his. Upon reflection, it seemed that he knew what was behind the curtained doorway leading to the back room of the medicine shop, and that he also knew that there was no longer any place to go except behind that curtain, since any place he went in his life would only be another puppet place. Yet it still seemed he was sur-

prised by what he found back there. And this is the most outrageously nonsensical thing of all—that he should have stepped behind the curtain and cried out with such profound surprise as he did. You, he said, or rather cried out. Get away from me. These were the last words that I heard clearly before Mr Vizniak's voice faded quickly out of earshot, as though he were being carried away at incredible velocity toward some great height. Now he would see, I thought during that brief moment. Mr Vizniak would see what controlled the strings of the clown puppet.

When morning finally came, and I looked behind the curtain, there was no one there. I told myself, as if for the sake of reassurance, that I would not be so surprised when my time came. No doubt Mr Vizniak had told himself, at some point in his life, the same, utterly nonsensical thing.

The Red Tower (2007 Teatro Grottesco Version)

First published in *The Nightmare Factory*, 1996

The ruined factory stood three stories high in an otherwise featureless landscape. Although somewhat imposing on its own terms, it occupied only the most unobtrusive place within the gray emptiness of its surroundings, its presence serving as a mere accent upon a desolate horizon. No road led to the factory, nor were there any traces of one that might have led to it at some time in the distant past. If there had ever been such a road it would have been rendered useless as soon as it arrived at one of the four, red-bricked sides of the factory, even in the days when the facility was in full operation. The reason for this was simple: no doors had been built into the factory; no loading docks or entranceways allowed penetration of the outer walls of the structure, which was solid brick on all four sides without even a single window below the level of the second floor. The phenomenon of a large factory so closed off from the outside world was a point of extreme fascination to me. It was almost with regret that I ultimately learned about the factory's subterranean access. But of course that revelation in its turn also became a source for my truly degenerate sense of amazement, my decayed fascination.

The factory had long been in ruins, its innumerable bricks worn and crumbling, its many windows shattered. Each of the three enormous stories that stood above the ground level was vacant of all but dust and silence. The machinery, which had densely occupied the three floors of the factory as well as considerable space beneath it, is said to have evaporated—I repeat, *evaporated*—soon after the factory ceased operation, leaving behind only a few spectral outlines of deep vats and tanks, twisting tubes and funnels, harshly grinding gears and levers, giant belts and wheels that could be most clearly seen at twilight—and later, not at all. According to these strictly hallucinatory accounts, the whole of the Red Tower, as the factory was known, had always been subject to *fadings* at certain times. This phenomenon, in the delirious or dying words of several witnesses, was due to a profound hostility between the noisy and malodorous operations of the factory and the desolate purity of the landscape surrounding it, the conflict occasionally resulting in temporary erasures, or fadings, of the former by the latter.

Despite their ostensibly mad or credulous origins, these testimonies, it seemed to me, deserved more than a cursory hearing. The legendary conflict between the factory and the grayish territory surrounding it may very well have been a fabrication of individuals who were lost in the advanced stages of either physical or psychic deterioration. Nonetheless, it was my theory, and remains so, that the Red Tower was not always that peculiar color for which it ultimately earned its fame. Thus the *encrimsoning* of the factory was a betrayal, a breaking-off, for it is my postulation that this ancient structure was in long-forgotten days the same pale hue

as the world which encompassed it. Furthermore, with an insight born of dispassion to the point of total despair, I envisioned that the Red Tower was never solely devoted to the lowly functions of an ordinary factory.

Beneath the three soaring stories of the Red Tower were two, possibly three, other levels. The one immediately below the first floor of the factory was the nexus of a unique distribution system for the goods which were manufactured on all three of the floors above. This first subterranean level in many ways resembled, and functioned in the manner of, an old-fashioned underground mine. Elevator compartments enclosed by a heavy wire mesh, twisted and corroded, descended far below the surface into an expansive chamber which had been crudely dug out of the rocky earth and was haphazardly perpetuated by a dense structure of supports, a criss-crossing network of posts and pillars, beams and rafters, that included a variety of materials—wood, metal, concrete, bone, and a fine sinewy webbing that was fibrous and quite firm. From this central chamber radiated a system of tunnels that honeycombed the land beneath the gray and desolate country surrounding the Red Tower. Through these tunnels the goods manufactured by the factory could be carried, sometimes literally by hand, but more often by means of small wagons and carts, reaching near and far into the most obscure and unlikely delivery points.

The trade that was originally produced by the Red Tower was in some sense remarkable, but not, at first, of an extraordinary or especially ambitious nature.

This was a gruesome array of goods that could perhaps best be described as novelty items. In the beginning there was a chaotic quality to the objects and constructions pro-

duced by the machinery at the Red Tower, a randomness that yielded formless things of no consistent shape or size or apparent design. Occasionally there might appear a peculiar ashen lump that betrayed some semblance of a face or clawing fingers, or perhaps an assemblage that looked like a casket with tiny irregular wheels, but for the most part the early productions seemed relatively innocuous. After a time, however, things began to fall into place, as they always do, rejecting a harmless and uninteresting disorder—never an enduring state of affairs—and taking on the more usual plans and purposes of a viciously intent creation.

So it was that the Red Tower put into production its new, more terrible and perplexing, line of unique novelty items. Among the objects and constructions now manufactured were several of an almost innocent nature. These included tiny, delicate cameos that were heavier than their size would suggest, far heavier, and lockets whose shiny outer surface flipped open to reveal a black reverberant abyss inside, a deep blackness roaring with echoes. Along the same lines was a series of lifelike replicas of internal organs and physiological structures, many of them evidencing an advanced stage of disease and all of them displeasingly warm and soft to the touch. There was a fake disembodied hand on which fingernails would grow several inches overnight and insistently grew back should one attempt to clip them. Numerous natural objects, mostly bulbous gourds, were designed to produce a long, deafening scream whenever they were picked up or otherwise disturbed in their vegetable stillness. Less scrutable were such things as hardened globs of lava into whose rough, igneous forms were set a pair of rheumy eyes that perpetually shifted their gaze from side to

side like a relentless pendulum. And there was also a humble piece of cement, a fragment broken away from any street or sidewalk, that left a most intractable stain, greasy and green, on whatever surface it was placed. But such fairly simple items were eventually followed, and ultimately replaced, by more articulated objects and constructions. One example of this complex type of novelty item was an ornate music box that, when opened, emitted a brief gurgling or sucking sound in emulation of a dying individual's death rattle. Another product manufactured in great quantity at the Red Tower was a pocket watch in a gold casing which opened to reveal a curious timepiece whose numerals were represented by tiny quivering insects while the circling ‘hands’ were reptilian tongues, slender and pink. But these examples hardly begin to hint at the range of goods that came from the factory during its novelty phase of production. I should at least mention the exotic carpets woven with intricate abstract patterns that, when focused upon for a certain length of time, composed themselves into fleeting phantasmagoric scenes of a kind which might pass through a fever-stricken or even permanently damaged brain.

As it was revealed to me, and as I have already revealed to you, the means of distributing the novelty goods fabricated at the Red Tower was a system of tunnels located on the first level, not the second (or, possibly, third), that had been excavated below the three-story factory building itself. It seems that these subterranean levels were not necessarily the foundation of the original plan of the factory but were in fact a perverse and unlikely development that might have occurred only as the structure known as the Red Tower underwent, over time, its own mutation from some prior state un-

til it finally became a lowly site for manufacturing. This mutation apparently demanded the excavation—whether from above or below I cannot say—of a system of tunnels as a means for distributing the novelty goods which, for a time, the factory produced.

As the unique inventions of the Red Tower achieved their final forms, they seemed to be assigned specific locations to which they were destined to be delivered, either by hand or by small wagons or carts pulled over sometimes great distances through the system of underground tunnels. Where they might ultimately pop up was anybody's guess. It might be in the back of a dark closet, buried under a pile of undistinguished junk, where some item of the highest and most extreme novelty would lie for quite some time before it was encountered by sheer accident or misfortune. Conversely, the same invention, or an entirely different one, might be placed on the night-table beside someone's bed for near-immediate discovery. Any delivery point was possible; none was out of the reach of the Red Tower. There has even been testimony, either intensely hysterical or semi-conscious, of items from the factory being uncovered within the shelter of a living body, or one not long deceased. I know that such an achievement was within the factory's powers, given its later production history. But my own degenerate imagination is most fully captured by the thought of how many of those monstrous novelty goods produced at the Red Tower had been scrupulously and devoutly delivered—solely by way of those endless underground tunnels—to daringly remote places where they would never be found, nor ever could be. Truly, the Red Tower worked in mysterious ways.

Just as a system of distribution tunnels had been created by the factory when it developed into a manufacturer of novelty goods, an expansion of this system was required as an entirely new phase of production gradually evolved. Inside the wire-mesh elevator compartment that provided access between the upper region of the factory and the underground tunnels, there was now a special lever installed which, when pulled back, or possibly pushed forward (I do not know such details), enabled one to descend to a second subterranean level. This latterly excavated area was much smaller, far more intimate, than the one directly above it, as could be observed the instant the elevator compartment came to a stop and a full view of things was attained. The scene which now confronted the uncertain minds of witnesses was in many ways like that of a secluded graveyard, surrounded by a rather crooked fence of widely spaced pickets held together by rusty wire. The headstones inside the fence all closely pressed against one another and were quite common, though somewhat antiquated, in their design. However, there were no names or dates inscribed on these monuments—nothing at all, in fact, with the exception of some rudimentary and abstract ornamentation. This could be verified only when the subterranean graveyard was closely approached, for the lighting at this level was dim and unorthodox, provided exclusively by the glowing stone walls enclosing the area. These walls seemed to have been covered with phosphorescent paint which bathed the graveyard in a cloudy, grayish haze. For the longest time—how long I cannot say—my morbid reveries were focused on this murky vision of a graveyard beneath the factory, a subterranean graveyard surrounded by a crooked picket fence and suf-

fused by the highly defective illumination given off by phosphorescent paint applied to stone walls. For the moment I must emphasize the vision itself, without any consideration paid to the utilitarian purposes of this place, that is, the function it served in relation to the factory above it.

The truth is that at some point all of the factory's functions were driven underground to this graveyard level. Long before the complete *evaporation* of machinery in the Red Tower, something happened to require the shut-down of all operations in the three floors of the factory which were above ground level. The reasons for this action are deeply obscure, a matter for contemplation only when a state of hopeless and devouring curiosity has reached its height, when the burning light of speculation becomes so intense that it threatens to incinerate everything on which it shines. To my own mind it seems entirely valid to reiterate at this juncture the longstanding tensions that existed between the Red Tower, which I believe was not always stigmatized by such a hue and such a title, and the grayish landscape of utter desolation that surrounded this structure on all sides, looming around and above it for quite incalculable distances. But below the ground level of the factory was another matter: it was here that its operations at some point retreated; it was here, specifically at this graveyard level, that they continued.

Clearly the Red Tower had committed some violation or offense, its clamoring activities and unorthodox products—perhaps its very existence—constituting an affront to the changeless quietude of the world around it. In my personal judgment there had been a betrayal involved, a treacherous breaking of a bond. I can certainly picture a time before the

existence of the factory, before any of its features blemished the featureless country that extended so gray and so desolate on every side. Dreaming upon the grayish desolation of that landscape, I also find it quite easy to imagine that there might have occurred a lapse in the monumental tedium, a spontaneous and inexplicable impulse to deviate from a dreary perfection, perhaps even an unconquerable desire to risk a move toward a tempting defectiveness. As a concession to this impulse or desire *out of nowhere*, as a minimal surrender, a creation took place and a structure took form where there had been nothing of its kind before. I picture it, at its inception, as a barely discernable irruption in the landscape, a mere sketch of an edifice, possibly translucent when making its first appearance, a gray density rising in the grayness, embossed upon it in a most tasteful and harmonious design. But such structures or creations have their own desires, their own destinies to fulfill, their own mysteries and mechanisms which they must follow at whatever risk.

From a gray and desolate and utterly featureless landscape a dull edifice had been produced, a pale, possibly translucent tower which, over time, began to develop into a factory and to issue, as if in the spirit of the most grotesque belligerence, a line of quite morbid, quite wonderfully disgusting novelty goods. In an expression of defiance, at some point, it reddened with an enigmatic passion for betrayal and perversity. On the surface the Red Tower might have seemed a splendid complement to the grayish desolation of its surroundings, making a unique, picturesque composition that served to define the glorious essence of each of them. But in fact there existed between them a profound and ineffable hostility. An attempt was made to reclaim the Red

Tower, or at least to draw it back toward the formless origins of its being. I am referring, of course, to that show of force which resulted in the *evaporation* of the factory's dense arsenal of machinery. Each of the three stories of the Red Tower had been cleaned out, purged of its offending means of manufacturing novelty items, and the part of the factory that rose above the ground was left to fall into ruins.

Had the machinery in the Red Tower not been evaporated, I believe that the subterranean graveyard, or something very much like it, would nonetheless have come into existence at some point or another. This was the direction in which the factory had been moving, a fact suggested by some of its later models of novelty items. Machines were becoming obsolete as the diseased mania of the Red Tower intensified and evolved into more experimental, even visionary projects. I have previously reported that the headstones in the factory's subterranean graveyard were absent of any names of the interred and were without dates of birth and death. This truth has been confirmed by numerous accounts rendered in borderline gibberish. The reason for these blank headstones is entirely evident as one gazes upon them standing crooked and closely packed together in the phosphorescent haze given off by the stone walls covered with luminous paint. None of these graves, in point of fact, could be said to have anyone buried in them whose names and dates of birth and death would require inscription on the headstones. These were not what might be called *burying graves*. This is to say that these were in no sense graves for burying the dead. Quite the contrary: these were graves of a highly experimental design from which the newest productions of the Red Tower were to be born.

From its beginnings as a manufacturer of novelty items of an extravagant nature, the factory had now gone into the business of creating what came to be known as 'hyper-organisms.' These new productions were also of a fundamentally extreme nature, representing an even greater divergence on the part of the Red Tower from the bland and gray desolation in the midst of which it stood. As implied by their designation as *hyper-organisms*, this line of goods displayed the most essential qualities of their organic nature, which meant, of course, that they were wildly conflicted in their two basic features. On the one hand, they manifested an intense *vitality* in all aspects of their form and function; on the other hand, and simultaneously, they manifested an ineluctable element of *decay* in these same areas. To state this matter in the most lucid terms: each of these hyper-organisms, even as they scintillated with an obscene degree of vital impulses, also, and at the same time, had degeneracy and death written deeply upon them. In accord with a tradition of dumbstruck insanity, it seems the less said about these offspring of the *birthing graves*, or any similar creations, the better.

I myself have been almost entirely restricted to a state of seething speculation concerning the luscious particularities of all hyper-organic phenomena produced in the subterranean graveyard of the Red Tower. Although we may reasonably assume that such creations were not to be called beautiful, we cannot know for ourselves the mysteries and mechanisms of, for instance, how these creations moved throughout the hazy luminescence of that underground world; what creaky or spasmic gestures they might have been capable of executing, if any; what sounds they might

have made or the organs used for making them; how they might have appeared when awkwardly emerging from deep shadows or squatting against those nameless headstones; what trembling stages of mutation they almost certainly would have undergone following the generation of their larvae upon the barren earth of the graveyard; what their bodies might have produced or emitted in the way of fluids and secretions; how they might have responded to the mutilation of their forms for reasons of an experimental or entirely savage nature. Often I picture to myself what frantically clawing efforts these creations probably made to deliver themselves from that confining environment which their malformed or nonexistent brains could not begin to understand. They could not have comprehended, any more than can I, for what purpose they were bred from those graves, those incubators of hyper-organisms, minute factories of flesh that existed wholly within and far below the greater factory of the Red Tower.

It was no surprise, of course, that the production of hyper-organisms was not allowed to continue for very long before a second wave of destruction was visited upon the factory. This time it was not merely the fading and ultimate evaporation of machinery that took place; this time it was something far more brutal. Once again, forces of ruination were directed at the factory, specifically the subterranean graveyard located at its second underground level, its three-story structure that stood above ground having already been rendered an echoing ruin. Information on what remained of the graveyard, and of its cleverly blasphemous works, is available to my own awareness only in the form of shuddering and badly garbled whispers of mayhem and devastation

and wholesale sundering of the most unspeakable sort. These same sources also seem to regard this incident as the culmination, if not the conclusion, of the longstanding hostilities between the Red Tower and that grayish halo of desolation that hovered around it on all sides. Such a shattering episode would appear to have terminated the career of the Red Tower.

Nevertheless, there are indications that, appearances to the contrary, the factory continues to be active despite its status as a silent ruin. After all, the evaporation of the machinery which turned out countless novelty items in the three-story red-brick factory proper, and the ensuing obsolescence of its sophisticated system of tunnels at the first underground level, did not prevent the factory from pursuing its business by other and more devious means. The work at the second underground level (the graveyard level) went very well for a time. Following the vicious decimation of those ingenious and fertile graves, along with the merchandise they produced, it may have seemed that the manufacturing history of the Red Tower had been brought to a close. Yet there are indications that below the three-story aboveground factory, below the first and the second underground levels, there exists a *third* level of subterranean activity. Perhaps it is only a desire for symmetry, a hunger for compositional balance in things, that has led to a series of the most vaporous rumors anent this third underground level, in order to provide a kind of complementary proportion to the three stories of the factory that rise into the gray and featureless landscape above ground. At this third level, these rumors maintain, the factory's schedule of production is being carried out in some new and strange manner, represent-

ing its most ambitious venture in the output of putrid creations, ultimately consummating its tradition of degeneracy, reaching toward a perfection of defect and disorder, according to every polluted and foggy rumor concerned with this issue.

Perhaps it seems that I have said too much about the Red Tower, and perhaps it has sounded far too strange. Do not think that I am unaware of such things. But as I have noted throughout this document, I am only repeating what I have heard. I myself have never seen the Red Tower—no one ever has, and possibly no one ever will. And yet wherever I go, people are talking about it. In one way or another they are talking about the nightmarish novelty items or about the mysterious and revolting hyper-organisms, as well as babbling endlessly about the subterranean system of tunnels and the secluded graveyard whose headstones display no names and no dates designating either birth or death. Everything they are saying is about the Red Tower, in one way or another, and about nothing else but the Red Tower. We are all talking and thinking about the Red Tower in our own degenerate way. I have only recorded what everyone is saying (though they may not know they are saying it), and sometimes what they have seen (though they may not know they have seen it). But still they are always talking, in one deranged way or another, about the Red Tower. I hear them talk of it every day of my life. Unless, of course, they begin to speak about that gray and desolate landscape, that hazy void in which the Red Tower—the great and industrious Red Tower—is so precariously nestled. Then the voices grow quiet until I can barely hear them as they attempt to communicate with me in choking scraps of post-nightmare trauma.

Now is just such a time when I must strain to hear the voices. I wait for them to reveal to me the new ventures of the Red Tower as it proceeds into even more corrupt phases of production, including the creations being turned out by the shadowy workshop of its third subterranean level. I must keep still and listen for the voices; I must remain quiet for a terrifying moment. Then I will hear the news of the factory starting up its operations once more. Then I will be able to speak again of the Red Tower.

A Soft Voice Whispers Nothing (2007 Teatro Grottesco Version)

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Long before I suspected the existence of the town near the northern border, I believe that I was in some way already an inhabitant of that remote and desolate place. Any number of signs might be offered to support this claim, although some of them may seem somewhat removed from the issue. Not the least of them appeared during my childhood, those soft gray years when I was stricken with one sort or another of life-draining infirmity. It was at this early stage of development that I sealed my deep affinity with the winter season in all its phases and manifestations. Nothing seemed more natural to me than my impulse to follow the path of the snow-topped roof and the ice-crowned fence-post, considering that I, too, in my illness, exhibited the marks of an essentially hibernal state of being. Under the plump blankets of my bed I lay freezing and pale, my temples sweating with shiny sickles of fever. Through the frosted panes of my bedroom window I watched in awful devotion as dull winter days were succeeded by blinding winter nights. I remained ever awake to the possibility, as my young mind conceived it, of an "icy transcendence." I was therefore cautious, even in my frequent states of delirium, never to indulge in a vulgar

sleep, except perhaps to dream my way deeper into that landscape where vanishing winds snatched me up into the void of an ultimate hibernation.

No one expected I would live very long, not even my attending physician, Dr. Zirk. A widower far along into middle age, the doctor seemed intensely dedicated to the well-being of the living anatomies under his care. Yet from my earliest acquaintance with him I sensed that he too had a secret affinity with the most remote and desolate locus of the winter spirit, and therefore was also allied with the town near the northern border. Every time he examined me at my bedside he betrayed himself as a fellow fanatic of a disconsolate creed, embodying so many of its stigmata and gestures. His wiry, white-streaked hair and beard were thinning, patchy remnants of a former luxuriance, much like the bare, frost-covered branches of the trees outside my window. His face was of a coarse complexion, rugged as frozen earth, while his eyes were overcast with the cloudy ether of a December afternoon. And his fingers felt so frigid as they palpated my neck or gently pulled at the underlids of my eyes.

One day, when I believe that he thought I was asleep, Dr. Zirk revealed the extent of his initiation into the barren mysteries of the winter world, even if he spoke only in the cryptic fragments of an overworked soul in extremis. In a voice as pure and cold as an arctic wind the doctor made reference to "undergoing certain ordeals," as well as speaking of what he called "grotesque discontinuities in the order of things." His trembling words also invoked an epistemology of "hope and horror," of exposing once and for all the true nature of this "great gray ritual of existence" and plunging headlong into an "enlightenment of inanity." It seemed that

he was addressing me directly when in a soft gasp of desperation he said, “To make an end of it, little puppet, in your own way. To close the door in one swift motion and not by slow, fretful degrees. If only this doctor could show you the way of such cold deliverance.” I felt my eyelashes flutter at the tone and import of these words, and Dr. Zirk immediately became silent. Just then my mother entered the room, allowing me a pretext to display an aroused consciousness. But I never betrayed the confidence or indiscretion the doctor had entrusted to me that day.

In any case, it was many years later that I first discovered the town near the northern border, and there I came to understand the source and significance of Dr. Zirk's mumblings on that nearly silent winter day. I noticed, as I arrived in the town, how close a resemblance it bore to the winterland of my childhood, even if the precise time of year was still slightly out of season. On that day, everything—the streets of the town and the few people travelling upon them, the store windows and the meager merchandise they displayed, the weightless pieces of debris barely animated by a half-dead wind—everything looked as if it had been drained entirely of all color, as if an enormous photographic flash had just gone off in the startled face of the town. And somehow beneath this pallid façade I intuited what I described to myself as the “all pervasive aura of a place that has offered itself as a haven for an interminable series of delirious events.”

It was definitely a mood of delirium that appeared to rule the scene, causing all that I saw to shimmer vaguely in my sight, as if viewed through the gauzy glow of a sick room: a haziness that had no precise substance, distorting without in any way obscuring the objects behind or within it. There was

an atmosphere of disorder and commotion that I sensed in the streets of the town, as if its delirious mood were only a soft prelude to great pandemonium. I heard the sound of something that I could not identify, an approaching racket that caused me to take refuge in a narrow passageway between a pair of high buildings. Nestled in this dark hiding place I watched the street and listened as that nameless clattering grew louder. It was a medley of clanging and creaking, of groaning and croaking, a dull jangle of something unknown as it groped its way through the town, a chaotic parade in honor of some special occasion of delirium.

The street that I saw beyond the narrow opening between the two buildings was now entirely empty. The only thing I could glimpse was a blur of high and low structures which appeared to quiver slightly as the noise became louder and louder, the parade closing in, though from which direction I did not know. The formless clamor seemed to envelop everything around me, and then suddenly I could see a passing figure in the street. Dressed in loose white garments, it had an egg-shaped head that was completely hairless and as white as paste, a clown of some kind who moved in a way that was both casual and laborious, as if it were strolling underwater or against a strong wind, tracing strange patterns in the air with billowed arms and pale hands. It seemed to take forever for this apparition to pass from view, but just before doing so it turned to peer into the narrow passage where I had secreted myself, and its greasy white face was wearing an expression of bland malevolence.

Others followed the lead figure, including a team of ragged men who were harnessed like beasts and pulled long bristling ropes. They also moved out of sight, leaving the

ropes to waver slackly behind them. The vehicle to which these ropes were attached — by means of enormous hooks — rolled into the scene, its great wooden wheels audibly grinding the pavement of the street beneath them. It was a sort of platform with huge wooden stakes rising from its perimeter to form the bars of a cage. There was nothing to secure the wooden bars at the top, and so they wobbled with the movement of the parade.

Hanging from the bars, and rattling against them, was an array of objects haphazardly tethered by cords and wires and straps of various kinds. I saw masks and shoes, household utensils and naked dolls, large bleached bones and the skeletons of small animals, bottles of colored glass, the head of a dog with a rusty chain wrapped several times around its neck, and sundry scraps of debris and other things I could not name, all knocking together in a wild percussion. I watched and listened as that ludicrous vehicle passed by in the street. Nothing else followed it, and the enigmatic parade seemed to be at an end, now only a delirious noise fading into the distance. Then a voice called out behind me.

"What are you doing back here?"

I turned around and saw a fat old woman moving toward me from the shadows of that narrow passageway between the two high buildings. She was wearing a highly decorated hat that was almost as wide as she was, and her already ample form was augmented by numerous layers of colorful scarves and shawls. Her body was further weighted down by several necklaces which hung like a noose around her neck and many bracelets about both of her chubby wrists. On the thick fingers of either hand were a variety of large gaudy rings.

“I was watching the parade,” I said to her. “But I couldn't see what was inside the cage, or whatever it was. It seemed to be empty.”

The woman simply stared at me for some time, as if contemplating my face and perhaps surmising that I had only recently arrived in the northern border town. Then she introduced herself as Mrs. Glimm and said that she ran a lodging house. “Do you have a place to stay?” she asked in an aggressively demanding tone. “It should be dark soon,” she said, glancing slightly upwards. “The days are getting shorter and shorter.”

I agreed to follow her back to the lodging house. On the way I asked her about the parade. “It's all just some nonsense,” she said as we walked through the darkening streets of the town. “Have you seen one of these?” she asked, handing me a crumpled piece of paper that she had stuffed among her scarves and shawls.

Smoothing out the page Mrs. Glimm had placed in my hands, I tried to read in the dimming twilight what was printed upon it.

At the top of the page, in capital letters, was a title: METAPHYSICAL LECTURE I. Below these words was a brief text which I read to myself as I walked with Mrs. Glimm. “It has been said,” the text began, “that after undergoing certain ordeals— whether ecstatic or abysmal—we should be obliged to change our names, as we are no longer who we once were. Instead the opposite rule is applied: our names linger long after anything resembling what we were, or thought we were, has disappeared entirely. Not that there was ever much to begin with—only a few questionable memories and impulses drifting about like snowflakes in a

gray and endless winter. But each soon floats down and settles into a cold and nameless void."

After reading this brief "metaphysical lecture," I asked Mrs. Glimm where it came from. "They were all over town," she replied. "Just some nonsense, like the rest of it. Personally I think this sort of thing is bad for business. Why should I have to go around picking up customers in the street? But as long as someone's paying my price I will accommodate them in whatever style they wish. In addition to operating a lodging house or two, I am also licensed to act as an undertaker's assistant and a cabaret stage manager. Well, here we are. You can go inside—someone will be there to take care of you. At the moment I have an appointment elsewhere." With these concluding words, Mrs. Glimm walked off, her jewelry rattling with every step she took.

Mrs. Glimm's lodging house was one of several great structures along the street, each of them sharing similar features and all of them, I later discovered, in some way under the proprietorship or authority of the same person—that is, Mrs. Glimm. Nearly flush with the street stood a series of high and almost styleless houses with institutional façades of pale gray mortar and enormous dark roofs. Although the street was rather wide, the sidewalks in front of the houses were so narrow that the roofs of these edifices slightly overhung the pavement below, creating a sense of tunnel-like enclosure. All of the houses might have been siblings of my childhood residence, which I once heard someone describe as an "architectural moan." I thought of this phrase as I went through the process of renting a room in Mrs. Glimm's lodging house, insisting that I be placed in one that faced the street. Once I was settled into my apartment, which was ac-

tually a single, quite expansive bedroom, I stood at the window gazing up and down the street of gray houses, which together seemed to form a procession of some kind, a frozen funeral parade. I repeated the words “architectural moan” over and over to myself until exhaustion forced me away from the window and under the musty blankets of the bed. Before I fell asleep I remembered that it was Dr. Zirk who used this phrase to describe my childhood home, a place that he had visited so often.

So it was of Dr. Zirk that I was thinking as I fell asleep in that expansive bedroom in Mrs. Glimm's lodging house. And I was thinking of him not only because he used the phrase “architectural moan” to describe the appearance of my childhood home, which so closely resembled those high-roofed structures along that street of gray houses in the northern border town, but also, and even primarily, because the words of the brief metaphysical lecture I had read some hours earlier reminded me so much of the words, those fragments and mutterings, that the doctor spoke as he sat upon my bed and attended to the life-draining infirmities from which everyone expected I would die at a very young age. Lying under the musty blankets of my bed in that strange lodging house, with a little moonlight shining through the window to illuminate the dreamlike vastness of the room around me, I once again felt the weight of someone sitting upon my bed and bending over my apparently sleeping body, ministering to it with unseen gestures and a soft voice. It was then, while pretending to be asleep as I used to do in my childhood, that I heard the words of a second “metaphysical lecture.” They were whispered in a slow and resonant monotone.

"We should give thanks," the voice said to me, "that a poverty of knowledge has so narrowed our vision of things as to allow the possibility of feeling something about them. How could we find a pretext to react to anything if we understood... everything? None but an absent mind was ever victimized by the adventure of intense emotional feeling. And without the suspense that is generated by our benighted state—our status as beings possessed by our own bodies and the madness that goes along with them—who could take enough interest in the universal spectacle to bring forth even the feeblest yawn, let alone exhibit the more dramatic manifestations which lend such unwonted color to a world that is essentially composed of shades of gray upon a background of blackness. Hope and horror, to repeat merely two of the innumerable conditions dependent on a faulty insight, would be much the worse for an ultimate revelation that would expose their lack of necessity. At the other extreme, both our most dire and most exalted emotions are well served every time we take some ray of knowledge, isolate it from the spectrum of illumination, and then forget it completely. All our ecstasies, whether sacred or from the slime, depend on our refusal to be schooled in even the most superficial truths and our maddening will to follow the path of forgetfulness. Amnesia may well be the highest sacrament in the great gray ritual of existence. To know, to understand in the fullest sense, is to plunge into an enlightenment of inanity, a wintry landscape of memory whose substance is all shadows and a profound awareness of the infinite spaces surrounding us on all sides. Within this space we remain suspended only with the aid of strings that quiver with our hopes and our horrors, and which keep us dangling over the

gray void. How is it that we can defend such puppetry, condemning any efforts to strip us of these strings? The reason, one must suppose, is that nothing is more enticing, nothing more vitally idiotic, than our desire to have a name—even if it is the name of a stupid little puppet—and to hold on to this name throughout the long ordeal of our lives as if we could hold on to it forever. If only we could keep those precious strings from growing frayed and tangled, if only we could keep from falling into an empty sky, we might continue to pass ourselves off under our assumed names and perpetuate our puppet's dance throughout all eternity."

The voice whispered more words than this, more than I can recall, as if it would deliver its lecture without end. But at some point I drifted off to sleep as I had never slept before, calm and gray and dreamless.

The next morning I was awakened by some noise down in the street outside my window. It was the same delirious cacophony I had heard the day before when I first arrived in the northern border town and witnessed the passing of that unique parade. But when I got up from my bed and went to the window, I saw no sign of the uproarious procession. Then I noticed the house directly opposite the one in which I had spent the night. One of the highest windows of that house across the street was fully open, and slightly below the ledge of the window, lying against the gray façade of the house, was the body of a man hanging by his neck from a thick white rope. The cord was stretched taut and led back through the window and into the house. For some reason this sight did not seem in any way unexpected or out of place, even as the noisy thrumming of the unseen parade grew increasingly louder and even when I recognized the fig-

ure of the hanged man, who was extremely slight of build, almost like a child in physical stature. Although many years older than when I had last seen him, his hair and beard now radiantly white, clearly the body was that of my old physician, Dr. Zirk.

Now I could see the parade approaching. From the far end of the gray, tunnel-like street, the clown creature strolled in its loose white garments, his egg-shaped head scanning the high houses on either side. As the creature passed beneath my window it looked up at me for a moment with that same expression of bland malevolence, and then passed on. Following this figure was the formation of ragged men harnessed by ropes to a cagelike vehicle that rolled along on wooden wheels. Countless objects, many more than I saw the previous day, clattered against the bars of the cage. The grotesque inventory now included bottles of pills that rattled with the contents inside them, shining scalpels and instruments for cutting through bones, needles and syringes strung together and hung like ornaments on a Christmas tree, and a stethoscope that had been looped about the decapitated dog's head.

The wooden stakes of the caged platform wobbled to the point of breaking with the additional weight of this cast-off clutter. Because there was no roof covering this cage, I could see down into it from my window. But there was nothing inside, at least for the moment. As the vehicle passed directly below, I looked across the street at the hanged man and the thick rope from which he dangled like a puppet. From the shadows inside the open window of the house, a hand appeared that was holding a polished steel straight razor. The fingers of that hand were thick and wore many gaudy rings.

After the razor had worked at the cord for a few moments, the body of Dr. Zirk fell from the heights of the gray house and landed in the open vehicle just as it passed by. The procession which was so lethargic in its every aspect now seemed to disappear quickly from view, its muffled riot of sounds fading into the distance.

To make an end of it, I thought to myself—to *make an end of it in whatever style you wish*.

I looked at the house across the street. The window that was once open was now closed, and the curtains behind it were drawn. The tunnel-like street of gray houses was absolutely quiet and absolutely still. Then, as if in answer to my own deepest wish, a sparse showering of snowflakes began to descend from the gray morning sky, each one of them a soft whispering voice. For the longest time I continued to stare out from my window, gazing upon the street and the town that I knew was my home.

His Shadow Shall Rise To A Higher House (2007 Teatro Grottesco Version)

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In the middle of the night I lay wide awake in bed, listening to the dull black drone of the wind outside my window and the sound of bare branches scraping against the shingles of the roof just above me. Soon my thoughts became fixed upon a town, picturing its various angles and aspects, a remote town near the northern border. Then I remembered that there was a hilltop graveyard that hovered not far beyond the edge of town. I have never told a soul about this graveyard, which for a time was a source of great anguish for those who had retreated to the barren landscape of the northern border.

It was within the hilltop graveyard, a place that was far more populated than the town over which it hovered, that the body of Ascrobius had been buried. Known throughout the town as a recluse who possessed an intensely contemplative nature, Ascrobius had suffered from a disease that left much of his body in a grossly deformed condition. Nevertheless, despite the distinguishing qualities of his severe deformity and his intensely contemplative nature, the death of Ascrobius was an event that passed almost entirely unnoticed. All of the notoriety gained by the recluse, all of the

comment I attached to his name, occurred sometime after his disease-mangled body had been housed among the others in the hilltop graveyard.

At first there was no specific mention of Ascrobius, but only a kind of twilight talk—dim and pervasive murmurs that persistently revolved around the graveyard outside of town, often touching upon more general topics of a morbid character, including some abstract discourse, as I interpreted it, on the phenomenon of the grave. More and more, whether one moved about the town or remained in some secluded quarter of it, this twilight talk became familiar and even invasive. It emerged from shadowed doorways along narrow streets, from half-opened windows of the highest rooms of the town's old houses, and from the distant corners of labyrinthine and resonant hallways. Everywhere, it seemed, there were voices that had become obsessed to the point of hysteria with a single subject: the ‘missing grave.’ No one mistook these words to mean a grave that somehow had been violated, its ground dug up and its contents removed, or even a grave whose headstone had absconded, leaving the resident of some particular plot in a state of anonymity. Even I, who was less intimate than many others with the peculiar nuances of the northern border town, understood what was meant by the words ‘a missing grave’ or ‘an absent grave.’ The hilltop graveyard was so dense with headstones and its ground so riddled with interments that such a thing would be astonishingly apparent: where there once had been a grave like any other, there was now, in the same precious space, only a patch of virgin earth.

For a certain period of time, speculation arose concerning the identity of the occupant of the missing grave. Because

there existed no systematic record-keeping for any particular instance of burial in the hilltop graveyard—when or where or for whom an interment took place—the discussions over the occupant of the missing grave, or the former occupant, always degenerated into outbursts of the wildest nonsense or simply faded into a vaporous and sullen confusion. Such a scene was running its course in the cellar of an abandoned building where several of us had gathered one evening. It was on this occasion that a gentleman calling himself Dr Klatt first suggested 'Ascrobius' as the name upon the headstone of the missing grave. He was almost offensively positive in this assertion, as if there were not an abundance of headstones on the hilltop graveyard with erroneous or unreadable names, or none at all.

For some time Klatt had been advertising himself around town as an individual who possessed a distinguished background in some discipline of a vaguely scientific nature. This persona or imposture, if it was one, would not have been unique in the history of the northern border town. However, when Klatt began to speak of the recent anomaly not as a missing grave, even an absent grave, but as an uncreated grave, the others began to listen. Soon enough it was the name of Ascrobius that was mentioned most frequently as the occupant of the missing—now uncreated—grave. At the same time the reputation of Dr Klatt became closely linked to that of the deceased individual who was well known for both his grossly deformed body and his intensely contemplative nature.

During this period it seemed that anywhere in town one happened to find oneself, Klatt was there holding forth on the subject of his relationship to Ascrobius, whom he now

called his ‘patient.’ In the cramped back rooms of shops long gone out of business or some other similarly out-of-the-way locale—a remote street corner, for instance—Klatt spoke of the visits he had made to the high backstreet house of Ascrobius and of the attempts he had made to treat the disease from which the recluse had long suffered. In addition, Klatt boasted of insights he had gained into the deeply contemplative personality whom most of us had never met, let alone conversed with at any great length. While Klatt appeared to enjoy the attention he received from those who had previously dismissed him as just another impostor in the northern border town, and perhaps still considered him as such, I believe he was unaware of the profound suspicion, and even dread, that he inspired due to what certain persons called his ‘meddling’ in the affairs of Ascrobius. ‘Thou shalt not meddle’ was an unspoken, though seldom observed, commandment of the town, or so it seemed to me. And Klatt's exposure of the formerly obscure existence of Ascrobius, even if the doctor's anecdotes were misleading or totally fabricated, would be regarded as a highly perilous form of meddling by many longtime residents of the town.

Nonetheless, nobody turned away whenever Klatt began talking about the diseased, contemplative recluse: nobody tried to silence or even question whatever claims he made concerning Ascrobius. ‘He was a monster,’ said the doctor to some of us who were gathered one night in a ruined factory on the outskirts of the town. Klatt frequently stigmatized Ascrobius as either a ‘monster’ or a ‘freak,’ though these epithets were not intended simply as a reaction to the grotesque physical appearance of the notorious recluse. It was in a strictly metaphysical sense, according to Klatt, that

Ascrobius should be viewed as most monstrous and freakish, qualities that emerged as a consequence of his intensely contemplative nature. ‘He had incredible powers available to him,’ said the doctor. ‘He might even have cured himself of his diseased physical condition; who can say? But all of his powers of contemplation, all of those incessant meditations that took place in his high backstreet house, were directed toward another purpose altogether.’ Saying this much, Dr Klatt fell silent in the flickering, makeshift illumination of the ruined factory. It was almost as if he were waiting for one of us to prompt his next words, so that we might serve as accomplices in this extraordinary gossip over his deceased patient, Ascrobius.

Eventually someone did inquire about the contemplative powers and meditations of the recluse, and toward what end they might have been directed. ‘What Ascrobius sought,’ the doctor explained, ‘was not a remedy for his physical disease, not a cure in any usual sense of the word. What he sought was an absolute annulment, not only of his disease but of his entire existence. On rare occasions he even spoke to me,’ the doctor said, ‘about the uncreation of his whole life.’ After Dr Klatt had spoken these words there seemed to occur a moment of the most profound stillness in the ruined factory where we were gathered. No doubt everyone had suddenly become possessed, as was I, by a single object of contemplation—the absent grave, which Dr Klatt described as an uncreated grave, within the hilltop graveyard outside of town. ‘You see what has happened,’ Dr Klatt said to us. ‘He has annulled his diseased and nightmarish existence, leaving us with an uncreated grave on our hands.’ Nobody who was at the ruined factory that night, nor anyone else in the north-

ern border town, believed there would not be a price to pay for what had been revealed to us by Dr Klatt. Now all of us had become meddling accomplices in those events which came to be euphemistically described as the 'Ascrobius escapade.'

Admittedly the town had always been populated by hysterics of one sort or another. Following the Ascrobius escapade, however, there was a remarkable plague of twilight talk about 'unnatural repercussions' that were either in the making or were already taking place throughout the town. Someone would have to atone for that uncreated existence, or such was the general feeling as it was expressed in various obscure settings and situations. In the dead of night one could hear the most reverberant screams arising at frequent intervals from every section of town, particularly the backstreet areas, far more than the usual nocturnal outbursts. And upon subsequent overcast days the streets were all but deserted. Any talk confronting the specifics of the town's night terrors was either precious or entirely absent: perhaps, I might even say, it was as uncreated as Ascrobius himself, at least for a time.

It was inevitably the figure of Dr Klatt who, late one afternoon, stepped forward from the shadows of an old warehouse to address a small group of persons assembled there. His shape barely visible in the gauzy light that pushed its way through dusty windowpanes, Klatt announced that he might possess the formula for solving the new-found troubles of the northern border town. While the warehouse gathering was as wary as the rest of us of any further meddling in the matter of Ascrobius, they gave Klatt a hearing in spite of their reservations. Included among this group was a

woman known as Mrs Glimm, who operated a lodging house —actually a kind of brothel—that was patronized for the most part by out-of-towners, especially business travelers stopping on their way to some destination across the border. Even though Klatt did not directly address Mrs Glimm, he made it quite clear that he would require an assistant of a very particular type in order to carry out the measures he had in mind for delivering us all from those intangible traumas that had lately afflicted everyone in some manner. ‘Such an assistant,’ the doctor emphasized, ‘should not be anyone who is exceptionally sensitive or intelligent.

‘At the same time,’ he continued, ‘this person must have a definite handsomeness of appearance, even a fragile beauty.’ Further instructions from Dr Klatt indicated that the requisite assistant should be sent up to the hilltop graveyard that same night, for the doctor fully expected that the clouds which had choked the sky throughout the day would linger long into the evening, thus cutting off the moonlight that often shone so harshly on the closely huddled graves. This desire for optimum darkness seemed to be a conspicuous giveaway on the doctor's part. Everyone present at the old warehouse was of course aware that such ‘measures’ as Klatt proposed were only another instance of meddling by someone who was almost certainly an impostor of the worst sort. But we were already so deeply implicated in the Ascrobius escapade, and so lacking in any solutions of our own, that no one attempted to discourage Mrs Glimm from doing what she could to assist the doctor with his proposed scheme.

So the moonless night came and went, and the assistant sent by Mrs Glimm never returned from the hilltop grave-

yard. Yet nothing in the northern border town seemed to have changed. The chorus of midnight outcries continued and the twilight talk now began to focus on both the ‘terrors of Ascrobius’ and the ‘charlatan Dr Klatt,’ who was nowhere to be found when a search was conducted throughout every street and structure of the town, excepting of course the high backstreet house of the dreadful recluse. Finally a small party of the town's least hysterical persons made its way up the hill which led to the graveyard. When they approached the area of the absent grave, it was immediately apparent what ‘measures’ Klatt had employed and the fashion in which the assistant sent by Mrs Glimm had been used in order to bring an end to the Ascrobius escapade.

The message which those who had gone up to the graveyard carried back to town was that Klatt was nothing but a common butcher. ‘Well, perhaps not a common butcher,’ said Mrs Glimm, who was among the small graveyard party. Then she explained in detail how the body of the doctor's assistant, its skin finely shredded by countless incisions and its parts numerously dismembered, had been arranged with some calculation on the spot of the absent grave: the raw head and torso were propped up in the ground as if to serve as the headstone for a grave, while the arms and legs were disposed in a way that might be seen to demarcate the rectangular space of a graveyard plot. Someone suggested giving the violated body a proper burial in its own gravesite, but Mrs Glimm, for some reason unknown even to herself, or so she said, persuaded the others that things should be left as they were. And perhaps her intuition in this matter was felicitous, for not many days later there was a complete cessation of all terrors associated with the Ascrobius escapade,

however indefinite or possibly nonexistent such occurrences might have been from the start. Only later, by means of the endless murmurs of twilight talk, did it become apparent why Dr Klatt might have abandoned the town, even though his severe measures seemed to have worked the exact cure which he had promised.

Although I cannot say that I witnessed anything myself, others reported signs of a 'new occupation,' not at the site of the grave of Ascrobius, but at the high backstreet house where the recluse once spent his intensely contemplative days and nights. There were sometimes lights behind the curtained windows, these observers said, and the passing figure outlined upon those curtains was more outlandishly grotesque than anything they had ever seen while the resident of that house had lived. But no one ever approached the house. Afterward all speculation about what had come to be known as the 'resurrection of the uncreated' remained in the realm of twilight talk. Yet as I now lie in my bed, listening to the wind and the scraping of bare branches on the roof just above me, I cannot help remaining wide awake with visions of that deformed specter of Ascrobius and pondering upon what unimaginable planes of contemplation it dreams of another act of uncreation, a new and far-reaching effort of great power and more certain permanence. Nor do I welcome the thought that one day someone may notice that a particular house appears to be missing, or absent, from the place it once occupied along the backstreet of a town near the northern border.

The Bells Will Sound Forever (2007 Teatro Grottesco Version)

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I was sitting in a small park on a drab morning in early spring when a gentleman who looked as if he should be in a hospital sat down on the bench beside me. For a time we both silently stared out at the colorless and soggy grounds of the park, where things were still thawing out and signs of a revived natural life remained only tentative, the bare branches of trees finely outlined against a gray sky. I had seen the other man on previous visits to the park and, when he introduced himself to me by name, I seemed to remember him as a businessman of some sort. The words ‘commercial agent’ came to my mind as I sat gazing up at the thin dark branches and, beyond them, the gray sky. Somehow our quiet and somewhat halting conversation touched upon the subject of a particular town near the northern border, a place where I once lived. ‘It's been many years,’ the other man said, ‘since I was last in that town.’ Then he proceeded to tell me about an experience he had had there in the days when he often traveled to remote locales for the business firm he represented and which, until that time, he had served as a longterm and highly dedicated employee.

It was late at night, he told me, and he needed a place to stay before moving on to his ultimate destination across the northern border. I knew, as a one-time resident of the town, that there were two principal venues where he might have spent the night. One of them was a lodging house on the west side of town that, in actuality, functioned primarily as a brothel patronized by travelling commercial agents. The other was located somewhere on the east side of town in a district of once-opulent, but now for the most part unoccupied houses, one of which, according to rumor, had been converted into a hostel of some kind by an old woman named Mrs Pyk, who was reputed to have worked in various carnival sideshows—first as an exotic dancer, and then later as a fortune-teller—before settling in the northern border town. The commercial agent told me that he could not be sure if it was misdirection or deliberate mischief that sent him to the east side of town, where there were only a few lighted windows here and there. Thus he easily spotted the vacancy sign that stood beside the steps leading up to an enormous house which had a number of small turrets that seemed to sprout like so many warts across its façade and even emerged from the high peaked roof that crowned the structure. Despite the grim appearance of the house (a 'miniature ruined castle,' as my companion in the park expressed it), not to mention the generally desolate character of the surrounding neighborhood, the commercial agent said that he was not for a moment deterred from ascending the porch steps. He pressed the doorbell, which he said was a 'buzzer-type bell,' as opposed to the type that chimed or tolled its signal. However, in addition to the buzzing noise that was made when he pressed the button for the doorbell, he

claimed that there was also a ‘jingle-jangle sound’ similar to that of sleigh bells. When the door finally opened, and the commercial agent confronted the heavily made-up face of Mrs Pyk, he simply asked, ‘Do you have a room?’

Upon entering the vestibule to the house, he was made to pause by Mrs Pyk, who gestured with a thin and palsied hand toward a registration ledger which was spread open on a lectern in the corner. There were no other visitors listed on the pages before him, yet the commercial agent unhesitatingly picked up the fountain pen that lay in the crux of the ledger book and signed his name: Q. H. Crumm. Having done this, he turned back toward Mrs Pyk and stooped down to retrieve the small suitcase he had brought in with him. At that moment he first saw Mrs Pyk's left hand, the non-palsied hand, which was just as thin as the other but which appeared to be a prosthetic device resembling the pale hand of an old mannikin, its enameled epidermis having flaked away in several places. It was then that Mr Crumm fully realized, in his own words, the ‘deliriously preposterous’ position in which he had placed himself. Yet he said that he also felt a great sense of excitation relating to things which he could not precisely name, things which he had never imagined before and which it seemed were not even possible for him to imagine with any clarity at the time.

The old woman was aware that Crumm had taken note of her artificial hand. ‘As you can see,’ she said in a slow and raspy voice, ‘I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself, no matter what some fool tries to pull on me. But I don't receive as many gentleman travelers as I once did. I'm sure I wouldn't have any at all, if it were up to certain people,’ she finished. Deliriously preposterous, Mr Crumm thought to

himself. Nevertheless, he followed Mrs Pyk like a little dog when she guided him into her house, which was so poorly lighted that one was at a loss to distinguish any features of the décor, leaving Crumm with the heady sensation of being enveloped by the most sumptuous surroundings of shadows. This feeling was only intensified when the old woman reached out for a small lamp that was barely glowing in the darkness and, with a finger of her real hand, turned up its wick, the light pushing back some of the shadows while grotesquely enlarging many others. She then began escorting Crumm up the stairs to his room, holding the lamp in her real hand while simply allowing her artificial hand to hang at her side. And with each step that Mrs Pyk ascended, the commercial agent seemed to detect the same jingle-jangle of bells that he had first heard when he was standing outside the house, waiting for someone to answer his ring. But the sound was so faint, as if heavily muffled, that Mr Crumm willingly believed it to be only the echo of a memory or his wandering imagination.

The room in which Mrs Pyk finally deposited her guest was on the highest floor of the house, just down a short, narrow hallway from the door leading to the attic. ‘By that time there seemed nothing at all preposterous in this arrangement,’ Mr Crumm told me as we sat together on the park bench looking out at that drab morning in early spring. I replied that such lapses in judgment were not uncommon where Mrs Pyk's lodging house was concerned; at least such were the rumors I had heard during the period when I was living in the town near the northern border.

When they had reached the hallway of the highest floor of the house, Crumm informed me, Mrs Pyk set aside the

lamp she was carrying on a table positioned near the top of the last flight of stairs. She then extended her hand and pushed a small button that protruded from one of the walls, thereby activating some lighting fixtures along either wall. The illumination remained dismal—actively dismal, as Crumm described it—but served to reveal the densely patterned wallpaper and the even more densely patterned carpeting of the hallway which led, in one direction, to the opening onto the attic and, in the other direction, to the room in which the commercial agent was supposed to sleep that night. After Mrs Pyk unlocked the door to this room and pushed another small button upon the wall inside, Crumm observed how cramped and austere was the chamber in which he was being placed, unnecessarily so, he thought, considering the apparent spaciousness, or 'dark sumptuousness,' as he called it, of the rest of the house. Yet Crumm made no objection (nor felt any, he insisted), and with mute obedience set down his suitcase beside a tiny bed which was not even equipped with a headboard. 'There's a bathroom just a little way down the hall,' Mrs Pyk said before she left the room, closing the door behind her. And in the silence of that little room, Crumm thought that once again he could hear the jingle-jangle sound of bells fading into the distance and the darkness of that great house.

Although he had put in quite a long day, the commercial agent did not feel in the least bit tired, or possibly he had entered into a mental state beyond the boundaries of absolute fatigue, as he himself speculated when we were sitting on that bench in the park. For some time he lay on the undersized bed, still fully clothed, and stared at a ceiling that had several large stains spread across it. After all, he

thought, he had been placed in a room that was directly below the roof of the house, and apparently this roof was damaged in some way which allowed the rain to enter freely through the attic on stormy days and nights. Suddenly his mind became fixed in the strangest way upon the attic, the door to which was just down the hall from his own room. The mystery of an old attic, Crumm whispered to himself as he lay on that miniature bed in a room at the top of an enormous house of enveloping shadows. Feelings and impulses that he had never experienced before arose in him as he became more and more excited about the attic and its mysteries. He was a traveling commercial agent who needed his rest to prepare himself for the next day, and yet all he could think about was getting up from his bed and walking down the dimly lighted hallway toward the door leading to the attic of Mrs Pyk's shadowy house. He could tell anyone who cared to know that he was only going down the hall to use the bathroom, he told himself. But Crumm proceeded past the door to the bathroom and soon found himself helplessly creeping into the attic, the door to which had been left unlocked.

The air inside smelled sweet and stale. Moonlight entered by way of a small octagonal window and guided the commercial agent among the black clutter toward a lightbulb that hung down from a thick black cord. He reached up and turned a little dial that protruded from the side of the lightbulb fixture. Now he could see the treasures surrounding him, and he was shaking with the excitation of his discovery. Crumm told me that Mrs Pyk's old attic was like a costume shop or the dressing room of a theater. All around him was a world of strange outfits spilling forth from the depths

of large open trunks or dangling in the shadows of tall open wardrobes. Later he became aware that these curious clothes were, for the most part, remnants from Mrs Pyk's days as an exotic dancer, and subsequently a fortune-teller, for various carnival sideshows. Crumm himself remembered observing that mounted along the walls of the attic were several faded posters advertising the two distinct phases of the old woman's former life. One of these posters portrayed a dancing girl posed in mid-turn amidst a whirl of silks, her face averted from the silhouetted heads representing the audience at the bottom of the picture, a mob of bald pates and bowler hats huddled together. Another poster displayed a pair of dark staring eyes with long spidery lashes. Above the eyes, printed in a serpentine style of lettering, were the words: Mistress of Fortune. Below the eyes, spelled in the same type of letters, was a simple question: WHAT IS YOUR WILL?

Aside from the leftover garments of an exotic dancer or a mysterious fortune teller, there were also other clothes, other costumes. They were scattered all over the attic—that 'paradise of the past,' as Crumm began to refer to it. His hands trembled as he found all sorts of odd disguises lying about the floor or draped across a wardrobe mirror, elaborate and clownish outfits in rich velvets and shiny, colorful satins. Rummaging among this delirious attic-world, Crumm finally found what he barely knew he was seeking. There it was, buried at the bottom of one of the largest trunks—a fool's motley complete with soft slippers turned up at the toes and a two-pronged cap that jangled its bells as he pulled it over his head. The entire suit was a mad patchwork of colored fabrics and fitted him perfectly, once he had removed all of the clothing he wore as a commercial agent.

The double peaks of the fool's cap resembled the twin horns of a snail, Crumm noticed when he looked at his image in the mirror, except that they drooped this way and that whenever he shook his head to make the bells jangle. There were also bells sewn into the turned-up tips of the slippers and hanging here and there upon the body of the jester's suit. Crumm made them all go jingle-jangle, he explained to me, as he pranced before the wardrobe mirror gazing upon the figure that he could not recognize as himself, so lost was he in a world of feelings and impulses he had never before imagined. He no longer retained the slightest sense, he said, of his existence as a travelling commercial agent. For him, there was now only the jester's suit hugging his body, the jingle-jangle of the bells, and the slack face of a fool in the mirror.

After a time he sank face-down upon the cold wooden floor of the attic, Crumm informed me, and lay absolutely still, exhausted by the contentment he had found in that musty paradise. Then the sound of the bells started up again, although Crumm could not tell from where it was coming. His body remained unmoving upon the floor in a state of sleepy paralysis, and yet he heard the sound of the jangling bells. Crumm thought that if he could just open his eyes and roll over on the floor he could see what was making the sound of the bells. But soon he lost all confidence in this plan of action, because he could no longer feel his own body. The sound of the bells became even louder, jangling about his ears, even though he was incapable of making his head move in any way and thus shaking the bells on his two-pronged fool's cap. Then he heard a voice say to him, ‘Open your eyes… and see your surprise.’ And when he opened his

eyes he finally saw his face in the wardrobe mirror: it was a tiny face on a tiny fool's head... and the head was at the end of a stick, a kind of baton with stripes on it like a candy cane, held in the wooden hand of Mrs Pyk. She was shaking the striped stick like a baby's rattle, making the bells on Crumm's tiny head go jingle-jangle so wildly. There in the mirror he could also see his body still lying helpless and immobile upon the attic floor. And in his mind was a single consuming thought: to be a head on a stick held in the wooden hand of Mrs Pyk. Forever... forever.

When Crumm awoke the next morning, he heard the sound of raindrops on the roof just above the room in which he lay fully clothed on the bed. Mrs Pyk was shaking him gently with her real hand, saying, 'Wake up, Mr Crumm. It's late and you have to be on your way. You have business across the border.' Crumm wanted to say something to the old woman then and there, confront her with what he described to me as his 'adventure in the attic.' But Mrs Pyk's brusque, businesslike manner and her entirely ordinary tone of voice told him that any inquiries would be useless. In any case, he was afraid that openly bringing up this peculiar matter with Mrs Pyk was not something he should do if he wished to remain on good terms with her. Soon thereafter he was standing with his suitcase in his hand at the door of the enormous house, lingering for a moment to gaze upon the heavily made-up face of Mrs Pyk and secure another glimpse of the artificial hand which hung down at her side.

'May I come to stay again?' Crumm asked.

'If you wish,' answered Mrs Pyk, as she held open the door for her departing guest.

Once he was outside on the porch Crumm quickly turned about-face and called out, ‘May I have the same room?’

But Mrs Pyk had already closed the door behind him, and her answer to his question, if it actually was one, was a faint jingle-jangle sound of tiny bells.

After consummating his commercial dealings on the other side of the northern border, Mr Crumm returned to the location of Mrs Pyk's house, only to find that the place had burned to the ground during the brief interval he had been away. I told him, as we sat on that park bench looking out upon a drab morning in early spring, that there had always been rumors, a sort of irresponsible twilight talk, about Mrs Pyk and her old house. Some persons, hysterics of one sort or another, suggested that Mrs Glimm, who operated the lodging house on the west side of town, was the one behind the fire which brought to an end Mrs Pyk's business activities on the east side. The two of them had apparently been associates at one time, in a sense partners, whose respective houses on the west and east sides of the northern border town were operated for the mutual benefit of both women. But a rift of some kind appeared to turn them into bitter enemies. Mrs Glimm, who was sometimes characterized as a ‘person of uncanny greed,’ became intolerant of the competition posed by her former ally in business. It came to be understood throughout the town near the northern border that Mrs Glimm had arranged for someone to assault Mrs Pyk in her own house, an attack which culminated in the severing of Mrs Pyk's left hand. However, Mrs Glimm's plan to discourage the ambitions of her competitor ultimately backfired, it seemed, for after this attack on her person Mrs Pyk appeared to undergo a dramatic change, as did

her method of running things at her east side house. She had always been known as a woman of exceptional will and extraordinary gifts, this one-time exotic dancer and later Mistress of Fortune, but following the dismemberment of her left hand, and its replacement by an artificial wooden hand, she seemed to have attained unheard-of powers, all of which she directed toward one aim—that of putting her ex-partner, Mrs Glimm, out of business. It was then that she began to operate her lodging house in an entirely new manner and in accordance with unique methods, so that whenever traveling commercial agents who patronized Mrs Glimm's west side lodging house came to stay at Mrs Pyk's, they always returned to Mrs Pyk's house on the east side and never again to Mrs Glimm's west-side place.

I mentioned to Mr Crumm that I had lived in that northern border town long enough to have been told on various occasions that a guest could visit Mrs Pyk just so many times before he discovered one day that he could never leave her again. Such talk, I continued, was to some extent substantiated by what was found in the ruins of Mrs Pyk's house after the fire. It seemed there were rooms all over the house, and even in the farthest corners of its vast cellar regions, where the charred remains of human bodies were found. To all appearances, given the intensely destructive nature of that conflagration, each of the incinerated corpses was dressed in some outlandish clothing, as if the whole structure of the house were inhabited by a nest of masqueraders. In light of all the stories we had heard in the town, no one bothered to remark on how unlikely it was, how preposterous even, that none of the lodgers at Mrs Pyk's house had managed to escape. Nevertheless, as I disclosed to Crumm, the body of Mrs

Pyk herself was never found, despite a most diligent search that was conducted by Mrs Glimm.

Yet even as I brought all of these facts to his attention as we sat on that park bench, Crumm's mind seemed to have drifted off to other realms and more than ever he looked as if he belonged in a hospital. Finally he spoke, asking me to confirm what I had said about the absence of Mrs Pyk's body among those found in the ashes left by the fire. I confirmed the statement I had made, begging him to consider the place and the circumstances which were the source of this and all my other remarks, as well as his own, that were made that morning in early spring. 'Remember your own words,' I said to Crumm.

'Which words were those?' he asked.

'Deliriously preposterous,' I replied, trying to draw out the sound of each syllable, as if to imbue them with some actual sense or at least a dramatic force of some kind. 'You were only a pawn,' I said. 'You and all those others were nothing but pawns in a struggle between forces you could not conceive. Your impulses were not your own. They were as artificial as Mrs Pyk's wooden hand.'

For a moment Crumm seemed to become roused to his senses. Then he said, as if to himself, 'They never found her body.'

'No, they did not,' I answered.

'Not even her hand,' he said in a strictly rhetorical tone of voice. Again I affirmed his statement.

Crumm fell silent after that juncture in our conversation, and when I left him that morning he was staring out at the drab and soggy grounds of that park with the look of someone in a hysterical trance, remaining quietly attentive

for some sound or sign to reach his awareness. That was the last time I saw him.

Occasionally, on nights when I find it difficult to sleep, I think about Mr Crumm the commercial agent and the conversation we had that day in the park. I also think about Mrs Pyk and her house on the east side of a northern border town where I once lived. In these moments it is almost as if I myself can hear the faint jingle-jangle of bells in the blackness, and my mind begins to wander in pursuit of a desperate dream that is not my own. Perhaps this dream ultimately belongs to no one, however many persons, including commercial agents, may have belonged to it.

When You Hear The Singing, You Will Know It Is Time (2007 Teatro Grottesco Version)

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I had lived in the town near the northern border long enough so that, with the occult passing of time, I had begun to assume that I would never leave there, at least not while I was alive.

I would die by my own hand, I might have believed, or possibly by the more usual means of some violent misadventure or some wasting disease. But certainly I had begun to assume that my life's end, as if by right, would take place either within the town itself or in close proximity to its outskirts, where the dense streets and structures of the town started to thin out and eventually dissolved into a desolate and seemingly endless countryside. Following my death, I thought, or had begun unwittingly to assume, I would be buried in the hilltop graveyard outside the town. I had no idea that there were others who might have told me that it was just as likely I would not die in the town and therefore would not be buried, or interred in any way whatsoever, within the hilltop graveyard. Such persons might have been regarded as hysterics of some kind, or possibly some type of impostor, since everyone who was a permanent resident of

the northern border town seemed to be either one or the other and often both of them at once. These individuals might have suggested to me that it was also entirely possible neither to die in the town nor ever to leave it. I began to learn how such a thing might happen during the time I was living in a small backstairs apartment on the ground floor of a large rooming house located in one of the oldest parts of town.

It was the middle of the night, and I had just awakened in my bed. More precisely, I had started into wakefulness, much as I had done throughout my life. This habit of starting into wakefulness in the middle of the night enabled me to become aware, on that particular night, of a soft droning sound which filled my small, one-room apartment and which I might not have heard had I been the sort of person who remains asleep all night long. The sound was emanating from under the floorboards and rose up to reverberate in the moonlit darkness of the entire room. After a few moments sitting up in my bed, and then getting out of bed to step quietly around my small apartment, it seemed to me that the soft droning sound I heard was made by a voice, a very deep voice, which spoke as if it were delivering a lecture of some kind or addressing an audience with the self-assured inflections of authority. Yet I could not discern a single word of what the voice was saying, only its droning intonations and its deeply reverberant quality as it rose up from beneath the floorboards of my small backstairs apartment.

Until that night I had not suspected that there was a cellar below the rooming house where I lived on the ground floor. I was even less prepared to discover, as I eventually did, that hidden under a small, worn-down carpet, which

was the only floor covering in my room, was a trap door—an access, it seemed, to whatever basement or cellar might have existed (beyond all my suspicions) below the large rooming house. But there was something else unusual about this trap door, aside from its very presence in my small apartment room and the fact that it implied the existence of some type of rooming-house cellar. Although the trap door was somehow set into the floorboards of my room, it did not in any way appear to be of a piece with them. The trap door, as I thought of it, did not at all seem to be constructed of wood but of something that was more of a leathery consistency, all withered and warped and cracked in places as though it did not fit in with the roughly parallel lines of the floorboards in my room but clearly opposed them both in its shape and its angles, which were highly irregular by any standards that might conceivably apply to a rooming-house trap door. I could not even say if this leathery trap door had four sides to it or possibly five sides or more, so elusive and misshapen was its crude and shriveled construction, at least as I saw it in the moonlight after starting into wakefulness in my small backstairs apartment. Yet I was absolutely certain that the deeply reverberant voice which continued to drone on and on as I inspected the trap door was in fact emanating from a place, a cellar or basement of some kind, directly below my room. I knew this to be true because I placed my hand, very briefly, on the trap door's leathery and irregular surface, and in that moment I could feel that it was pulsing in a way that corresponded to the force and rhythms of the voice which echoed its indecipherable words throughout the rest of that night, fading only moments before daylight.

Having remained awake for most of the night, I left my backstairs apartment and began to wander the streets of the northern border town on a cold and overcast morning in late autumn. Throughout the whole of that day I saw the town, where I had already lived for some time, under an aspect I had not known before. I have stated that this town near the northern border was a place where I had assumed I would one day die, and I may even say it was a place where I actually desired to make an end of it, or such was the intention or wish that I entertained at certain times and in certain places, including my residence in one of the oldest sections of the town. But as I wandered the streets on that overcast morning in late autumn, and throughout the day, my entire sense of my surroundings, as well as my intuition that my existence would be terminated within those surroundings, had become altered in a completely unexpected manner. The town had, of course, always displayed certain peculiar and often profoundly surprising qualities and features. Sooner or later everyone who was a permanent resident there was confronted with something of a nearly insupportable oddity or corruption.

As I wandered along one byway or another throughout that morning and into late afternoon, I recalled a specific street near the edge of town, a dead-end street where all the houses and other buildings seemed to have grown into one another, melding their diverse materials into a bizarre and jagged conglomerate of massive architectural proportions, with peaked roofs and soaring chimneys or towers visibly swaying and audibly moaning even in the calm of an early summer twilight. I had thought that this was the absolute limit, only to find out at exactly the moment of having this

thought that there was something further involved with this street, something that caused persons living in the area to repeat a special slogan or incantation to whomever would listen. When you hear the singing, they said, you will know it is time. These words were spoken, and I heard them myself, as if the persons uttering them were attempting to absolve or protect themselves in some way that was beyond any further explication. And whether or not one heard the singing or had ever heard what was called the singing, and whether or not that obscure and unspeakable time ever came, or would ever come to those who arrived in that street with its houses and other buildings all mingled together and tumbling into the sky, there nevertheless remained within you the feeling that this was still the place—the town near the northern border—where you came to live and where you might believe you would be a permanent resident until either you chose to leave it or until you died, possibly by violent misadventure or some wasting disease, if not by your own hand. Yet on that overcast morning in late autumn I could no longer maintain this feeling, not after having started into wakefulness the night before, not after having heard that droning voice which delivered some incomprehensible sermon for hours on end, and not after having seen that leathery trap door which I placed my hand upon for only a brief moment and thereafter retreated to the furthest corner of my small apartment until daylight.

And I was not the only one to notice a change within the town, as I discovered when twilight drew on and more of us began to collect on street corners or in back alleys, as well as in abandoned storefront rooms or old office buildings where most of the furniture was badly broken and out-of-date cal-

endars hung crooked on the walls. It was difficult for some persons to refrain from observing that there seemed to be fewer of us as the shadows of twilight gathered that day. Even Mrs Glimm, whose lodging house-plus-brothel was as populous as ever with its out-of-town clientele, said that among the permanent residents of the northern border town there was a ‘noticeably diminished’ number of persons.

A man named Mr Pell (sometimes Doctor Pell) was to my knowledge the first to use the word ‘disappearances’ in order to illuminate, during the course of one of our twilight gatherings, the cause of the town's slightly reduced population. He was sitting in the shadows on the other side of an overturned desk or bookcase, so his words were not entirely audible as he whispered them in the direction of a darkened doorway, perhaps speaking to someone who was standing, or possibly lying down, in the darkness beyond the aperture. But once this concept—of ‘disappearances,’ that is—had been introduced, it seemed that quite a few persons had something to say on the subject, especially those who had lived in the town longer than most of us or who had lived in the oldest parts of the town for more years than I had. It was from one of the latter, a veteran of all kinds of hysteria, that I learned about the demonic preacher Reverend Cork, whose sermonizing I had apparently heard during the previous night as it reverberated through the leathery trap door in my apartment room. ‘You didn't happen to open that trap door, did you?’ the old hysteric asked in a somewhat coy tone of voice. We were sitting, just the two of us, on some wooden crates we had found in the opening to a narrow alley. ‘Tell me,’ he urged as the light from a streetlamp shone upon his

thin face in the darkening twilight. ‘Tell me that you didn't just take a little peek inside that trap door.’ I then told him I had done nothing of the sort. Suddenly he began to laugh hysterically in a voice that was both high-pitched and extremely coarse. ‘Of course you didn't take a little peek inside the trap door,’ he said when he finally settled down. ‘If you had, then you wouldn't be here with me, you would be there with him.’

The antics and coy tone of the old hysteric notwithstanding, there was a meaning in his words that resonated with my experience in my apartment room and also with my perception that day of a profound change in the town near the northern border. At first I tended to conceive of the figure of Reverend Cork as a spirit of the dead, someone who had ‘disappeared’ by wholly natural means. In these terms I was able to think of myself as having been the victim of a haunting at the large rooming house where, no doubt, many persons had ended their lives in one way or another. This metaphysical framework seemed to apply nicely to my recent experiences and did not conflict with what I had been told in that narrow alley as twilight turned into evening. I was indeed here, in the northern border town with the old hysteric, and not there, in the land of the dead with Reverend Cork the demonic preacher.

But as the night wore on, and I moved among other residents of the town who had lived there far longer than I, it became evident that Reverend Cork, whose voice I had heard ‘preaching’ the night before, was neither dead, in the usual sense of the word, nor among those who had only recently ‘disappeared,’ many of whom, I learned, had not disappeared in any mysterious way at all but had simply aban-

doned the northern border town without notifying anyone. They had made this hasty exodus, according to several hysterics or impostors I spoke with that night, because they had 'seen the signs,' even as I had seen that leathery trap door whose existence in my apartment room was previously and entirely unsuspected.

Although I had not recognized it as such, this trap door, which appeared to lead to a cellar beneath the rooming house where I lived, was among the most typical of the so-called 'signs.' All of them, as numerous persons hysterically avowed, were indications of some type of threshold—doorways or passages that one should be cautious not to enter, or even to approach. Most of these signs, in fact, took the form of doors of various types, particularly those which might be found in odd, out-of-the-way places, such as a miniature door at the back of a broom closet or a door appearing on the inner wall of a fireplace, and even doors that might not seem to lead to any sensible space, as would be the case with a trap door in an apartment on the ground floor of a rooming house that did not have a cellar, nor had ever had one that could be accessed in such a way. I did hear about other such 'threshold-signs,' including window frames in the most queer locations, stairways that spiraled downward into depths beneath a common basement or led below ground level along lonely sidewalks, and even entrances to streets that were not formerly known to exist, with perhaps a narrow gate swinging open in temptation.

Yet all of these signs or thresholds gave themselves away by their distinctive appearance, which, according to many of those knowledgeable of such things, was very much like that withered and leathery appearance of the trap door in my

apartment room, not to mention displaying the same kind of shapes and angles that were strikingly at odds with their surroundings.

Nevertheless, there were still those who, for one reason or another, chose to ignore the signs or were unable to resist the enticements of thresholds that simply cropped up overnight in the most unforeseen places around the northern border town. To all appearances, at that point, the demonic preacher Reverend Cork had been one of the persons who had 'disappeared' in this way. I now became aware, as the evening progressed into a brilliantly star-filled night, that I had not been the victim of a haunting, as I had earlier supposed, but had actually witnessed a phenomenon of quite a different sort.

'The reverend has been gone since the last disappearances,' said an old woman whose face I could barely see in the candlelight that illuminated the enormous, echoing lobby of a defunct hotel where some of us had gathered after midnight. But someone took issue with the old woman, or 'idiot-hag,' as this person called her. The preacher, this other person contended in exactly the following words, was old town. This was my first exposure to the phrase 'old town,' but before I could take in its full meaning or implications it began to undergo a metamorphosis among those gathered after midnight in the lobby of that defunct hotel. While the person who called the old woman an idiot-hag continued to speak of the 'old town,' where he said Reverend Cork resided or was originally from, the old woman and a few of those who sided with her spoke only about the other town. 'No one is from the other town,' the woman said to the person who was calling her an idiot-hag. 'There are only

those who disappear into the other town, among them the demonic preacher Reverend Cork, who may have been a ludicrous impostor but was never what anyone would call demonic until he disappeared into that trap door in the room where this gentleman,' she said, referring to me, 'heard him preaching only last night.'

'You idiot-hag,' said the other person, 'the old town existed on the very spot where this northern border town now exists… until the day when it disappeared, along with everyone who lived in it, including the demonic preacher Reverend Cork.'

Then someone else, who was lying deep in the cushions of an old divan in the lobby, added the following words: 'It was a demon town and was inhabited by demonic entities of all sorts who made the whole thing invisible. Now they throw out these thresholds as a way to lure another group of us who only want to live in this town near the northern border and not in some intolerable demon town.'

Nonetheless, the old woman and the few others who sided with her persisted in speaking not about an old town or an invisible demon town, but about the other town, which, they all agreed, never had any concrete existence to speak of, but was simply a metaphysical backdrop to the northern border town that we all knew and that was a place where many of us fervently desired to make an end of our lives. Whatever the facts in this matter, one point was hammered into my brain over and over again: there was simply no peace to be had no matter where you hid yourself away. Even in a northern border town of such intensely chaotic oddity and corruption there was still some greater chaos, some deeper insanity, than one had counted on, or

could ever be taken into account—wherever there was anything, there would be chaos and insanity to such a degree that one could never come to terms with it, and it was only a matter of time before your world, whatever you thought it to be, was undermined, if not completely overrun, by another world.

Throughout the late hours of that night the debates and theories and fine qualifications continued regarding the spectral towns and the tangible thresholds that served to reduce the number of permanent residents of the northern border town, either by causing them to disappear through some out-of-the-way door or window or down a spiraling stairway or phantom street, or by forcing them to abandon the town because, for whatever reason, it had become, or seemed to become, something quite different from the place they had known it to be, or believed it to be, for so long. Whether or not they arrived at a resolution of their conflicting views I will never know, since I left the defunct hotel while the discussion was still going strong. But I did not go back to my small apartment in one of the oldest parts of town. Instead I wandered out to the hilltop graveyard outside of town and stood among the graves until the following morning, which was as cold and overcast as the one before it. I knew then that I would not die in the northern border town, either by means of a violent misadventure or a wasting disease, or even by my own hand, and therefore I would not be buried in the hilltop graveyard where I stood that morning looking down on the place where I had lived for so long. I had already wandered the streets of the northern border town for the last time and found, for whatever reason, that they had become something different from what they

had been, or had once seemed to be. This was the only thing that was now certain in my mind. For a moment I considered returning to the town and seeking out one of the newly appeared thresholds in order to enter it before all of them mysteriously disappeared again, so that I might disappear along with them into the other town, or the old town, where perhaps I might find once more what I seemed to have lost in the northern border town. Possibly there might have been something there—on the other side of the town—that was like the dead-end street where, it was said, 'When you hear the singing, you will know it is time.' And while I might never be able to die in the town near the northern border, neither would I ever have to leave it. To have such thoughts was, of course, only more chaos and insanity. But I had not slept for two nights. I was tired and felt the ache of every broken dream I had ever carried within me. Perhaps I would one day seek out another town in another land where I could make an end of it, or at least where I could wait in a fatalistic delirium for the end to come. Now it was time to just walk away in silence.

Years later I learned there was a movement to 'clean up' the northern border town of what was elsewhere perceived to be its 'contaminated' elements. On arriving in the town, however, the investigators assigned to this task discovered a place that was all but deserted, the only remaining residents being a few hysterics or impostors who muttered endlessly about 'other towns' or 'demon towns,' and even of an 'old town.' Among these individuals was a large and gaudily attired old woman who styled herself as the owner of a lodging house and several other properties. These venues, she said, along with many others throughout the town, had been

rendered uninhabitable and useless for any practical purpose. This statement seemed to capsulize the findings of the investigators, who ultimately composed a report that was dismissive of any threat that might be posed by the town near the northern border, which, whatever else it may have been, or seemed to be, was always a genius of the most insidious illusions.

Crampton
(1998 X-Files Script)

This is the original script for *Crampton*, an X-Files episode written by Thomas Ligotti and Brandon Trenz. It was later re-worked and republished as *Crampton*, produced by Durtro Press in 2002

CRAMPTON
an episode of "The X Files"
by
Thomas Ligotti and Brandon Trenz
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FADE IN:

SUPER: J. EDGAR HOOVER BLDG., WASHINGTON, DC

INT. FBI HEADQUARTERS

A MAN exits an elevator and walks through the halls of FBI headquarters. We never see his face, only glimpses of slicked-back blond hair and his clothes: a black suit, stiff white cuffs, white gloves, shiny black shoes—classic stage magician attire.

Though he walks without pretense of stealth, his passage seems com-

pletely undetected. The FBI agents that mill about the halls and offices do not notice him as he goes by, or their attention is drawn elsewhere just as he comes into view. Those in his path appear to step out of his way without even knowing it.

CUT TO:

INT. ELEVATOR

AGENT FOX MULDER and AGENT DANA SCULLY enter the elevator on another floor. They are in the middle of a conversation. Judging by the look on Scully's face, she's wishing it was over already.

MULDER
So, seriously, you never saw Star Wars?

SCULLY
Nope.

MULDER
Never?

SCULLY
What did I just say?

MULDER
How could you not see Star Wars?

SCULLY
I was a little more into Grease at the time.

MULDER
Jeez, Scully, it's only like the most popular movie ever.

SCULLY
No, that's Titanic—which you never saw.

MULDER
Yeah, well, I know how it ends.

CUT TO:

INT. FBI HEADQUARTERS

The blond man enters a door marked “Criminal Division.” At one of the half-dozen or so cubicles inside sits AGENT LARRY JOHNSON, studying a sheaf of black-and-white photographs. The man strides to Agent Johnson's desk and reaches into his jacket.

BLOND MAN
(in a dead voice)

Larry Johnson?

AGENT JOHNSON
(looking up)
Yes?

Johnson's face goes ashen.

AGENT JOHNSON
How did you get in here?

JOHNSON's POV: We get a very brief glimpse of the invading figure's face—handsome but bland, forgettable—before it is blocked by the BARREL OF A .44. The .44 EXPLODES—bang! bang!

The ROAR of gunfire breaks the spell. FBI agents turn toward the gunshots to see Agent Johnson slammed backwards, thrown out of his chair, knocking down the wall of his cubicle.

The AGENT nearest Agent Johnson leaps at the assassin, tackling him around the waist. The two men hit the ground with an alarming CLATTER.

The agent rises on his elbows.

AGENT
What the hell?

What previously was a man dressed in stage magician's clothes is now a BROKEN-UP PLASTER MANNIKIN. The head has become detached from the body and is still SPIN-NING a few feet away.

CUT TO:

INT. FBI HEADQUARTERS, MINUTES LATER

Agents Mulder and Scully step off the elevator into chaos: FBI agents and EMS personnel are swarming around the fallen Larry Johnson.

MULDER
(to the nearest agents)
What's going on?

AGENT
You don't want to know.

ANOTHER AGENT
It was Johnson.

MULDER
Larry Johnson?

EMS personnel wheel a gurney past them—on it, the body of Larry Johnson.

SCULLY (O.S.)
Did you know him, Mulder?

Mulder looks at the mannikin parts strewn across the floor, and for a moment he hesitates, as if trying to remember something.

SCULLY (O.S.)
Mulder?

CLOSE UP on the mannikin's face.

CREDITS

INT. AUTOPSY ROOM, NEXT DAY

Mulder enters the swinging doors, holding a folded newspaper. Scully stands next to an operating table in scrubs. On the table is the body of Larry Johnson.

MULDER
Well, the Bureau's collective underwear is really up in a bunch on this one. The word from Skinner is that the Director wants hourly reports until this thing is cleaned up. You

should see it, it's like a Fed convention around here. They've already come up with the “official” story.

He unfolds the newspaper, showing Scully the front page.

SCULLY
(reading)
“Assassin guns down FBI agent. Terrorism not ruled out.” What terrorism?

MULDER
My sentiments exactly.

SCULLY
Actually, at this point it's probably as good an explanation as anything else.

MULDER
I take that to mean the autopsy has proved less than illuminating.

SCULLY
Agent Lawrence Johnson died at two-nineteen p.m. yesterday of a massive heart attack.

MULDER
Heart attack? Well, that explains it.

SCULLY
Explains what, exactly?

MULDER
How this could kill him.

Mulder holds up an evidence bag containing what appears to be the .44 used to shoot Agent Larry Johnson. He pulls the gun out, points it in the air, and pulls the trigger. Out of the barrel POPS a little flag with the word “Bang!” on it.

SCULLY
But weren't there gunshots?

MULDER
The agents on the scene seem to be having trouble remembering little details like that. What's more, the security cameras on that floor apparently began malfunctioning about the time the, uh, terrorist entered the building. Started picking up television signals.

SCULLY
All of them?

Mulder shrugs.

MULDER
(pointing to Johnson)‘s body)
So, what do we tell Skinner about this?

SCULLY
I'm not sure yet, but I think Larry Johnson saw the gun and believed he had been shot, and the shock killed him. He was, for lack of a better expression, tricked to death. It's not exactly common, but it has happened before.

She lifts the sheet off Johnson to show Mulder the body.

SCULLY
And then there's this...

Scully takes a penlight and, opening Johnson's eyelids with her fingers, shines it into Johnson's dead eyes. THE PUPILS SHRINK as the light hits them. Scully points the light away. The PUPILS EXPAND.

JOHNSON's POV: Looking up from the table, we see Scully shine the light down again, then move it away.

MULDER
Ah. That.

SCULLY
Mulder, when we got to the scene of the shooting, or whatever it was, you clearly recognized Larry Johnson. Do you have some idea what this is all about?

MULDER
Meet me back in my office.

JOHNSON's POV: Still looking up, we see Mulder walk out of view. Scully looks down at Johnson's body, then pulls the sheet back over him, covering the CAMERA.

INT. MULDER's OFFICE

Mulder and Scully are watching a series of videotapes on a small television.

MULDER
About seven years ago, Johnson and his partner, Ricky Smith, were following a fraud case—late-night infomercials for a psychic hotline.

On the TELEVISION SCREEN, gaudy red letters announce “The

Mystery Line," along with an 800 number. The words dissolve into the image of a blandly handsome BLOND MAN, sitting at a desk next to a heavy black telephone.

BLOND MAN
(on the video)
What lottery numbers will make you rich? How can you make that someone special notice you? What is your purpose in life? When will you die? The Mystery Line has the answers to all your questions.

The man holds up the receiver and looks at the camera, appearing to almost stare through the screen.

BLOND MAN
(on the video)
Call now, if you really want to know.

Mulder hits eject and fishes for another tape, popping it into the VCR.

MULDER
I was with Violent Crimes at the time. Johnson and Smith called us in when they visited the homes of some of the Mystery Line's clients.

On the TELEVISION SCREEN, a hand-held camera documents the interior of an apartment. Several FBI agents stand over the body of a middle-aged woman, her dead eyes open and staring. Near her open hand is a telephone receiver. In the background we can hear television STATIC.

MULDER
Eleven people, mostly in the Midwest, were found like this. No apparent cause of death. Television on. Phone off the hook—still connected to the Mystery Line. And check this out.

Mulder points to the television screen. An agent takes a penlight and inspects the dead woman's eyes. The PUPILS CONTRACT as the light hits them.

MULDER
Look familiar?

SCULLY
Larry Johnson. So, what was the deal with the Mystery Line?

MULDER
Johnson and Smith never made any headway. The phone number was traced back to an answering machine in an abandoned warehouse in Arizona. None of the victims were actually charged for the hotline's services, so there was no way to follow the money.

Mulder points to the television screen again.

MULDER
There. That's Ricky Smith.

On the SCREEN, a rotundish man with a neatly trimmed beard is giving orders. At one point he turns angrily toward the camera.

RICKY SMITH (ON THE VIDEOTAPE)
Get that thing out of my face!

MULDER
He had a reputation as an arrogant s.o.b., but he was actually a hell of an agent. Tenacious.

He stops the tape.

SCULLY
So where is Ricky Smith now?

MULDER
Nobody knows. We were taken off the case when it was clear it was going nowhere. I heard Smith and Johnson had some kind of blow-up. Smith resigned not long after, and nobody has heard from him since.

Mulder takes a slip of paper out of an evidence bag and hands it to Scully.

MULDER
The man who shot Larry Johnson? This was found in his pocket.

It is a receipt slip, the old kind that requires a sheet of carbon paper underneath to make a merchant's copy. On it is stenciled the name of the merchant, which Scully reads out loud.

SCULLY
Illusions of Empire Magic Shop. Mulder, there isn't anything else on this.

MULDER
Check out the back.

Scully turns the receipt over. On the back in a neat but somehow antiquated hand is a map showing a few roads, but there are no names or compass directions. At one crossroads is a box labeled “Yellow House.”

SCULLY
This doesn't tell us a whole lot, Mulder.

MULDER
Well, it's all we've got to work with right now. Skinner wants this wrapped up a-sap—an FBI agent getting gunned down at his desk doesn't look too good on recruiting day.

SUPER: ILLUSIONS OF EMPIRE, EMPIRE, MICHIGAN

INT. MAGIC SHOP

Illusions of Empire is a dank little shop that looks and smells like an old basement. Shelves bow under the weight of boxes with labels like “Glass Box Penetration,” “Smashed Watch Gimmick,” “Nest o’ Balls,” and “Bloody Needle Gag.”

One wall of the shop is devoted entirely to ventriloquist dummies. Mulder takes one down—the label reads “My name is Laffo!”—and clumsily manipulates the mouth.

MULDER
(mumbling through clenched teeth)
Hi there, kids! Hi there, kids!

DUMMY's POV: CLOSE UP on Mulder's face, his comic smile. The dummy's head turns, showing Scully looking at Mulder the way a mother looks at a misbehaving child. Mulder puts “Laffo” back on his shelf.

Illusion of Empire's SHOPKEEP is standing behind the counter. He looks like some small-time hustler out of an old gangster movie: greasy hair, thin mustache, smoking an unfiltered cigarette down to a nub with another one behind his ear.

SHOPKEEP
How can I help you folks today?

MULDER
(flashing his i.d.)

We'd like to ask you about a purchase that was made here.

SHOPKEEP
Sure, Officer...
(he squints at Mulder's i.d.)
... Muldoon.

MULDER
Mulder.

Scully hands him the receipt.

SCULLY
We'd like to know who made this purchase and what they bought.

The shopkeep looks at the blank receipt, then back up at the agents with a suspicious smile.

SHOPKEEP
You're kidding, right? There ain't nothing on this. Don't look like they bought anything.

SCULLY
All the same...

SHOPKEEP
Well, I guess I could check the back. I keep copies of my receipts for

taxes. Don't want to get in trouble with the Feds, right?

The shopkeep winks, jots down the receipt number and disappears into the back. Mulder, meanwhile, is goofing around with a miniature guillotine. He sticks his index finger through the slicing hole and SLAMS the plunger down, sending the small but obviously sharp blade toward his finger. It appears to pass right through. Mulder wiggles his finger and smiles.

MULDER
Pretty cool, eh?

SCULLY
Yep, pretty cool.

The shopkeep emerges from the back with another slip of paper.

SHOPKEEP
This must be your lucky day. I found your receipt. I'd say it's about four years old.

He shows the merchant's copy of the receipt to the agents.

SHOPKEEP
Looks like they bought a gag gun. You know, the kind where you pull the trigger and a little flag pops out, "Bang!"

Mulder takes the receipt. On it, above the words "Gag Gun, one," in the same oddly ancient script as the map, is an address.

SCULLY
Why didn't this address show up on our receipt?

SHOPKEEP
Did you try this?

He takes the original receipt from Scully. Producing a lighter from his shirt pocket, the shopkeep places its flame near the paper. Brown lettering fades into view: the address, 222 Main Street, Crampton, Ohio; the words "Gag Gun, one;" and, at the bottom, "If you really want to know." At this, the agents exchange a look.

SHOPKEEP
Invisible ink. Hokey as it gets.

SCULLY
That doesn't make sense. Forensics tested the paper for chemicals. They would have found traces of the ink.

The shopkeep lights another cigarette.

SHOPKEEP
That's why they call it magic, toots.

The shopkeep starts to hand the original receipt back to the agents, then notices the map on the back, with the words “Yellow House.” A broadly cunning look develops on his face.

SHOPKEEP
Yellow house, huh?

MULDER
What? Does this mean something to you?

SHOPKEEP
It's probably nothing, but there's this saying among magicians. Not all of them, just certain magicians. The ones that are a little kooky, if you know what I mean.

SCULLY
What kind of saying?

SHOPKEEP
“I never want to live in a yellow house.”

MULDER
What does it mean?

He takes a long drag off his cigarette, blowing the smoke out his nose.

SHOPKEEP
Dunno. I'm not that kind of magician.

Mulder and Scully take back the receipt and head for the exit. At the door, Mulder is practically knocked over by a CLOWN, its face made up into a smile of torturous proportions. The clown mimes brushing itself off before heading into the shop. Mulder is visibly shaken.

SCULLY
You're not one of those people who's scared of clowns, are you?

Inside the shop, the clown turns towards Mulder and Scully. Slowly

and very deliberately, it jams a finger way up into one of its clown nostrils. It is almost an obscene gesture.

MULDER
I am now.

CUT TO:

SUPER: RURAL ROUTE 7, OHIO

INT. CAR

Route 7 traverses a particularly flat and featureless section of Ohio—a pretty flat and featureless state to begin with. Mulder and Scully pass mile after mile of cornfields, mom-and-pop gas stations, and sun-blistered farmhouses.

MULDER
I don't know about you, Scully, but I've got a funny feeling. Like I've been down this road before.

Scully looks out the window. There doesn't appear to be anything about this region that would jog anyone's memory of anything.

SCULLY
Well, numerous forms of déjà vu-type experiences have been documented. Some are related to states of epilepsy or psychopathology. One of the more common varieties is paramnesia—a split-second disordering of the short-term memory. Sort of a mental hiccup. Another form—

MULDER
(interrupting)
I don't think it's déjà vu, Scully. It's more like... like something I already know rather than something I've already experienced. It's very hard to put into words.

SCULLY
(pointing ahead)
Mulder, do you see that?

Mulder's eyes follow Scully's finger. With the flatness of the land, they can see miles in the distance. Ahead, apparently on this same road, is a house.

MULDER
It's a house.

SCULLY
It's a yellow house.

MULDER
Our yellow house?

Scully checks the map on the back of the magic shop receipt.

SCULLY
It's hard to tell from this, but it could be.

Scully looks up at the yellow house again. Heat waves coming off the asphalt of Route 7 distort the view, making it appear watery.

SCULLY
(squinting to make out the house)
Mulder, shouldn't we be getting closer?

MULDER
(also squinting)
Aren't we?

Despite the fact that they are doing ten over the speed limit, they don't seem to have closed the gap at all.

SCULLY
I don't think so.

As they talk, their car passes through a copse of trees—a rarity in this barren area—and for a moment, the house is out of their view. When they emerge from the trees, the yellow house is right on top of them. Mulder slams on the brakes. The car comes to a SKIDDING stop in front of the yellow house.

MULDER
(catching his breath)
That was interesting.

EXT. YELLOW HOUSE - DAY

The yellow house is small, but from the outside appears well maintained. The front porch is painted white, with flowery accents. Under the front door is a fancy welcome mat.

Mulder and Scully KNOCK on the door. There is no answer. Mulder tries the handle: it is unlocked.

MULDER
Ah, one of those neighborhoods.

INT. YELLOW HOUSE

They enter. The inside of the yellow house is as uninviting as the exterior is welcoming: dark, musty, and overwhelmingly claustrophobic, it looks more like a nest than a home.

MULDER
Hello?

Mulder nearly trips over a bunch of tin cans that are stacked near the front door. He holds a can up for Scully to see. Its label reads, “POTTED MEAT.”

SCULLY
Yummy.

From deeper within the yellow house comes the unmistakable sound of a shotgun RACKING. Mulder and Scully spin to face the sound, their guns drawn.

Standing in the narrow hallway, holding a shotgun in shaky hands, is a rotundish MAN with a bushy, unkempt beard and wild, feral eyes. He has the crazed look of someone who hasn't slept in a long, long time.

SCULLY
FBI! Drop it!

The bearded man complies, though more out of fatigue than obedience. He looks at Mulder.

BEARDED MAN
Ah, Agent Mulder.

MULDER
(shocked)
Ricky Smith?

RICKY SMITH nods. Wasted and apparently exhausted, he bears little resemblance to the “arrogant s.o.b.” from the crime-scene videos.

MULDER
What happened to you?

RICKY SMITH
You don't really want to know.

He drops into a chair.

RICKY SMITH
What brings you out here, to the middle of nowhere?

SCULLY
It's Larry Johnson. He's dead.

RICKY SMITH
(with a wry smile)
Lucky bastard.

FADE OUT

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

FADE IN:

INT. YELLOW HOUSE KITCHEN

Mulder, Scully, and Ricky stand around the yellow house's squalid little kitchen. Mulder and Scully have brought Ricky up to date on their investigation of Johnson's murder, and they are now hitting him with a barrage of questions.

SCULLY
Are you sure there's nothing you can tell us that might help us out? Something about the Mystery Line case, maybe?

RICKY SMITH
I'm sorry, Agent Scully. It was a long time ago.

SCULLY
Had you spoken with Johnson re-

cently?

RICKY SMITH
My relationship with the Bureau ended six years ago.

MULDER
I heard that it ended on something of a sour note. Some kind of falling-out between you and Johnson?

RICKY SMITH
We just had trouble seeing things the same way. We'd been partners for a long time. It happens. You'll see.

MULDER
So how did you end up here? “The middle of nowhere”—your words.

RICKY SMITH
I like it out here, in the heartland. Once you live here you never want to live anywhere else. It's real.

MULDER
Compared to what?

From the way they look at the filthy house, the tins of potted meat, it's obvious Mulder and Scully aren't buying it. Ricky sees it, too. In an

attempt to change the subject, he opens a drawer and pulls out a pack of playing cards.

RICKY SMITH
Do you like card tricks, Agent Scully? I don't care for them myself, but some people do seem to enjoy such things. Magic. Illusion. Smarmy little creeps in tuxedoes. All that nonsense.

Ricky shuffles the cards, fanning the deck face-down.

RICKY SMITH
Please take a card, Agent Mulder.

Mulder draws the Eight of Spades. He then slips it back into the deck. Ricky mixes the pack again, using a rather theatrical one-handed shuffle. He fans the cards face-up. Mulder checks the deck.

MULDER
No Eight of Spades.

RICKY SMITH
It's in your partner's hand.

Scully, whose hands have been in her coat pocket the whole time, re-

moves them. In her left palm she is cupping the Eight of Spades.

SCULLY
(to Mulder)
You put the card in my pocket.

MULDER
I did not. I know better than to reach into a woman's pockets, Scully. It must have been there before.

RICKY SMITH
In magic, like in everything else, the logical explanation is almost always the right one. Almost.

Ricky pulls a folded piece of paper out of his pocket.

RICKY SMITH
This came through my mail slot a few hours ago.

He unfolds it and hands it to Scully. She reads the words, written in that now-familiar script, out loud.

SCULLY
“She is holding the Eight of Spades.”

MULDER
Any idea who sent it?

RICKY SMITH
That's a question I'm afraid I can't answer.

SCULLY
Can't? Or won't?

RICKY SMITH
Bit of both, I suppose.

Mulder produces the magic shop receipt.

MULDER
You could say this came through our mail slot too. It was found on the, uh, man who killed Agent Johnson.

RICKY SMITH
(reading the receipt)
“If you really want to know.” Now, where have I heard that before?

He hands the receipt back to Mulder.

RICKY SMITH
222 Main Street is a fix-it shop run by a guy named Fred something. It's

closed most of the time, like just about everything in that crummy little town. But you might get lucky. Personally, I think you should forget the whole thing and head back to Cincinnati before it gets too late.

MULDER
(a little frustrated)
Ricky, we're not on a social call here. An FBI agent is dead, killed right in the middle of the J. Edgar friggin Hoover Building, and the Director has taken it a little personally. Once upon a time you might have been able to label this thing "unsolved" and let it go at that, but that's not really an option for us now.

RICKY SMITH
I'll tell you what: go check out your address. If you really want to stick around Crampton, you're welcome to stay here.

Mulder and Scully look at each other. Given the general squalor of the yellow house, Ricky's offer is not an appealing one.

RICKY SMITH
Or, if you want, there's a cheap little motel in town. You go there, have a look around. If you still want to talk to me, we can talk tomorrow. It's not like I'm going anywhere.

MULDER
(pulling out a notebook and pen)
What's your phone number?

RICKY SMITH
Don't have a phone number. Don't have a phone.

SCULLY
You don't have a telephone?

RICKY SMITH
Nope.

Mulder hands Ricky his cell phone.

MULDER
I want you to take this, then. Scully's cell phone number is star-six. Call us if you remember anything you think we ought to know.

SUPER: MAIN STREET, CRAMPTON, OHIO

EXT. MAIN STREET - DAY

“Crummy little town” does not even begin to describe this desolate burg. Though Mulder and Scully's drive down Crampton's Main Street takes them past a number of buildings, most appear to be abandoned. There seem to be only three active businesses: the “Fix-It and Supply” shop, the Oasis Motel that Ricky mentioned, and a diner apparently called “EAT HERE.”

INT. OASIS MOTEL

Mulder and Scully enter the office of the Oasis Motel, their overnight bags over their shoulders. Mulder RINGS the service bell. Also in the office is an older COUPLE. Judging by their colorfully patterned clothes, sunglasses, and cameras, they are tourists.

TOURIST WOMAN
(in a British accent)
Excuse me, could we take your picture?

SCULLY
I'm sorry?

TOURIST WOMAN
My husband and I are on a photographic excursion, and we'd like to take a picture of you and your husband. It would go so well with the others.

Mulder puts his arm around Scully's shoulders.

MULDER
Why, certainly!

SCULLY
(shrugging Mulder)‘s arm off)
We're not married.

Too late: the woman's camera FLASHES, and the picture is taken. As the tourist couple leaves, the MANAGER appears from a back room.

MANAGER
Good afternoon. Have you stayed with us before?

Scully begins filling out the necessary forms, while Mulder surveys the small office. A cigarette machine, the kind with the pull-knobs. Two faux-leather chairs, cracked by heat and sunlight. A gumball dis-

penser, with a small sign saying the proceeds benefit the local Knights of Columbus.

On a small table is a stack of leaflets. Mulder reads one, then takes it over to Scully. “Spectacular Display of Illusion and Ventriloquism,” it promises, to be held at three o'clock the next day at the Masonic Hall.

SCULLY
Mulder, I think I've seen enough magic tricks for one day.

MULDER
Look at this, Scully.

Mulder points to the bottom of the advertisement: “Sponsored by Illusions of Empire.”

MANAGER
Ah, yes. Our little magic show. You don't want to miss that. It's the only show in town, so to speak.

He hands them two keys.

MANAGER
If there's anything you need, please don't hesitate to ask me. I'm always at the disposal of my guests.

EXT. MAIN STREET - LATE AFTERNOON

Mulder stands on the sidewalk in front of the “Fix-It and Supply Shop.” Scully is some distance behind him, talking on her cellphone. There is a sign on the shop's door: “BACK AT SEVEN.”

Scully ends her phone call and walks over to Mulder.

SCULLY
That was Skinner. They're not having any luck on their end. On top of that, the terrorist cover story seems to have backfired: an official at the Syrian embassy in Washington was assassinated about two hours ago, and the Syrians are calling it an “act of retribution” on the part of the United States.

MULDER
Retribution for what? Oh, no—Johnson's murder?

SCULLY
Exactly. And since it's too late to retract the terrorist story, they're just going to have to ride it out.

MULDER
Washington must be a real mad-house. For the first time today, I'm glad we're in Crampton.

SCULLY
Speaking of which, what's the story with the Fix-It Shop?

MULDER
(checking his watch)
We've got about a half hour before Fred's due back. Let's have a look at the hall where this magic show is supposed to be held.

They cross the street and walk the half-block to the Masonic Hall. From the outside, it looks like every other ruined, abandoned building along Main Street, except for the rather cryptic Masonic symbols adorning its face, which Mulder stands contemplating for some moments.

SCULLY
Don't tell me you've never seen a Masonic Hall before.

MULDER
You know, Scully, there are thou-

sands of these things in cities all over the world, but the origins of Freemasonry itself are all but unknown. In the prehistoric period they were one of the first secret societies—possibly the first cult. Some scholars trace the beginnings of the Freemasons to the Egyptian god Thoth, the god of wisdom and learning who's thought of as a source of the earliest writings that attempt to illuminate the mysteries of existence. Thoth is also considered by some to be the first sorcerer or magician, and by others—

SCULLY
(interrupting at the word “magician”)
Hold it. Are you trying to tell me that this is some kind of conspiracy involving the Freemasons?

MULDER
Jeez, Scully, when you say it like that, you make it sound... kinda stupid.

Scully tries the hall's main door. It is unlocked. She pushes it open and the agents look inside. Pitch black.

MULDER
Looks like a flashlight job.

SCULLY
Great.

INT. MASONIC HALL

For a second, everything is black. Then a flashlight beam slices through the darkness.

Even by flashlight, the agents can see the Masonic Hall is a total disaster: broken chairs and debris litter the floor, dust and filth has accumulated in piles in the corners. There is a stage, the wooden planks of which don't look like they can support a person's weight. Still hanging across the stage is a curtain, obviously once quite ornate but now in tatters.

SCULLY
I don't know about you, but I don't think there's going to be a magic show here tomorrow.

MULDER
That's okay—I really hate matinees, anyway.

The beam of the flashlight flickers and goes out. They are plunged into complete blackness.

MULDER
Scully, I think I'm having déjà vu all over again. Scully?

SCULLY
I think I'm having it, too. Not déjà vu exactly. It's like you said: not something you've already done, but something you already know.

There is a CRACK, not unlike that of a hand smacking a flashlight. The beam blazes back to life.

MULDER
(pointing the flashlight)
Is that an office back there?

INT. MASONIC HALL OFFICE

The agents enter the tiny office, the beam of the flashlight roaming around the room. It stops on a desk, apparently the only piece of furniture in the whole building. On it sits a heavy black phone.

SCULLY
Mulder, does this look familiar at

all?

MULDER
The Mystery Line commercial.

Mulder goes over to the desk. He hesitates a moment, then picks up the telephone receiver. He starts to bring it to his ear...

SCULLY
Uh, Mulder?

Mulder shines the flashlight towards Scully's voice. She is holding up the end of the telephone cord. It is frayed, wires dangling, as though it were torn from the wall. Mulder, a little embarrassed, sets the receiver back in its cradle.

EXT. MAIN STREET - EVENING

Mulder and Scully exit the ruined hall, overcoats dusty, hair full of cobwebs. Scully dusts herself off.

SCULLY
When we get back to the motel, I'm going to take a long shower.

MULDER
Looks like Fred's back.

Across the street, the Fix-It and Supply Shop's sign has been turned around to read “OPEN FOR BUSINESS.” Inside, a figure can be seen working. Mulder begins crossing the street. Scully stands there, pulling long, dusty knots of cobweb out of her hair.

MULDER
Coming?

SCULLY
Sure. Why not.

INT. FIX-IT SHOP

A small bell RINGS as Mulder and Scully enter the Fix-It shop. The shopowner, FRED, does not look up. Wearing overalls and a pair of glasses, one lens of which has been fitted with an eyepiece for working on minute mechanisms, he is hunched over some obscure device, working at it with tiny tools.

SCULLY
Excuse me?

Fred still does not acknowledge them.

SCULLY
Excuse me, I'm Agent Scully. This is Agent Mulder. We're with the FBI.

FRED
(concentrating on his gizmo)
I heard about you.

Fred goes back to ignoring the agents. Scully, looking around the shop, notices a sheet of paper on the counter. She holds it up for Mulder to see: “Spectacular Display of Illusion and Ventriloquism.”

MULDER
Sir, we're here on an investigation.

He holds up the receipt from Illusions of Empire.

MULDER
Maybe you could tell us how your shop's address turned up on this receipt.

With a sigh full of irritation, Fred finally gets up from his workbench to examine the receipt.

FRED
(reading slowly)
“Illusions... of... Empire.” Magic

shop? I've never been too interested in magic.

Fred squints, reading through the magnifying eyepiece.

FRED
Why, that ain't even my handwriting. Sorry, can't help you.

MULDER
Sir, I understand you're probably a very busy man, but this is kind of a serious matter.

Outside, an old van—the kind with no windows along its sides—pulls in front of the shop.

FRED
Listen, agent whoever you are. I don't belong to any militia and I ain't never done anything illegal, least not that I know of. I'm just trying to run a business here. I take whatever jobs come my way—mostly piecework.

Fred holds up his gizmo as an example. Even up close, the thing offers no clue as to what it is or what it does.

FRED
I usually don't know what the whole machine looks like, and to tell you the truth I don't much care. Now, however serious it might seem, this business that brought you here... well, offhand I'd say someone is having some fun at your expense.

Mulder looks to his partner for some help, but the look on Scully's face says she's thinking the same thing as Fred.

Outside, a teenage KID pops out of the passenger door of the van and enters the Fix-It shop. Fred puts down his gizmo.

FRED
Excuse me, but I have a real customer.

Fred waves the kid over the the far end of the desk, away from the agents. He retrieves something from a shelf, a package of some sort wrapped in black paper and held together with leather straps. Fred and the kid turn their shoulders to Mulder and Scully and speak in

WHISPERS so they cannot overhear. Fred seems to be giving the kid some kind of instructions: he grasps his left hand with the thumb and forefinger of his right, creating the image of a handcuff or shackle of some kind. He then moves both hands as if pulling a length of rope, letting it go slack and pulling it taut again. The kid nods. Finally, the kid exits the shop with his package under his arm and gets in the van, which drives away.

MULDER
We'd like to ask you a couple more questions.

FRED
No. No, sir, I'm closing up for the night. I'm going to have to ask you to leave.

MULDER
I'm sure it will just take a few minutes of your time.

FRED
I'll tell you what. It's past my dinner time. If you really want to talk that bad, we can talk over at the diner.

He takes a ratty coat off a hook.

FRED
I got to go out the back to turn the lights out. I'll meet you out front and we can walk there together.

EXT. MAIN STREET - EVENING

Mulder and Scully exit through the front door; inside, they see Fred hit a series of light switches, then open a back door and step out.

Mulder and Scully wait a few moments. No sign of Fred. The agents walk to the back of the building.

EXT. BACK OF FIX-IT SHOP - EVENING

The rear of the fix-it shop is a blank brick wall, bearing a few stains and patches of crumbling mortar. There is no back door.

SCULLY
Wonderful.

INT. “EAT HERE” DINER

Treacly MUZAK plays to empty tables. As with seemingly every building in Crampton, the diner

displays an advertisement for the "spectacular" magic show tomorrow at three, this one taped to the front window.

Mulder and Scully enter and take seats at the counter.

MULDER
(in a tired voice)
Okay, Scully, so what do we have so far?

SCULLY
(also tired)
So far? Nothing I'd care to bring back to Skinner. Unless you want to haul Ricky Smith to Washington to do card tricks for the director. It's as though none of this has anything to do with Agent Johnson's murder anymore. It's all changed. I feel like we're on some kind of weird scavenger hunt.

Scully seems on the brink of something, but can't quite articulate it.

SCULLY
It's almost like all this is just an excuse to... to... something. I don't know, maybe—

COUNTERGIRL
(appearing suddenly and interrupting Scully)
Good evening, folks! Would you like to try the meatloaf tonight?

Mulder and Scully look up sharply, Scully's train of thought lost. The COUNTERGIRL is tall and very attractive, but wearing too much makeup, giving her face a waxy appearance.

MULDER
Uh... yeah, sure. And a Coke, please.

COUNTERGIRL
And for you, ma'am?

Scully is a little out of it, still trying to hold onto her last thought... to no avail.

SCULLY
Just some coffee for me, thanks.

MULDER
Can I ask you something? How do you—the town, I mean—stay in business? It doesn't seem like there's enough people around here to support it.

COUNTERGIRL
Oh, tourists, mostly.

SCULLY
Tourists?

COUNTERGIRL
Oh, sure. We get lots of people like you passing through here.

The countergirl nods in the direction of a table toward the back. There, the couple on a “photographic excursion” is seated. They are scooping chunks of meatloaf and lumps of mashed potatoes into their mouths, seemingly not pausing between bites to swallow. They turn to Mulder and Scully and smile, their chins dripping gravy.

MULDER
You know, on second thought...

He stops as Scully's cell phone rings. She answers it.

SCULLY
Scully.

RICKY SMITH
(on Mulder's cell phone in the yellow house)

Where have you been? I've been ringing you for an hour! Are you two still in Crampton?

SCULLY
Yes.

RICKY SMITH
Get out. Get out while you still can.

SCULLY
What do you—

Ricky hangs up.

SCULLY
Mulder, that was Ricky. I think something's wrong.

MULDER
Let's go.

The agents take their coats and leave. A few seconds after they've gone, the tourists stand and leave, their meal only partially eaten. The countergirl clears their plates and goes through a swinging door, presumably to the back of the building. The diner is once again empty. After a moment, the LIGHTS GO OUT.

FADE OUT

END OF ACT TWO

ACT THREE

FADE IN:

INT. YELLOW HOUSE

Mulder, Scully, and Ricky are together in the yellow house. Whereas before he was low-key and a little evasive, Ricky now is agitated. He unfolds a sheet of paper and holds it up for them to see: “Spectacular Display of Illusion and Ventriloquism.”

RICKY SMITH
This came through my mail slot about an hour ago. Have you seen this?

SCULLY
Yes. They're pretty much all over town.

RICKY SMITH
This is bad. This is very bad. You definitely don't want to be around if —when—this thing happens.

MULDER
We checked out the Masonic Hall. I don't see any spectacular displays happening in that place. Not tomorrow, not next week, probably not ever.

RICKY SMITH
Agent Mulder, I'm guessing you've been in Crampton long enough to know that what you see has very little to do with what you get. And you don't want to be there when they give it to you.

SCULLY
The Mystery Line. So you did continue the investigation on your own.

RICKY SMITH
(nodding)
I couldn't let it go. Cases like that were my special interest. Being able to point my finger and say, with all the authority of the Justice Department behind me, “Look, this is all a fake, none of this is real, it's all a con.” Those opportunities somehow justified all my work, maybe my whole life. When we looked into the Mystery Line, Larry and I, we

could tell it was a front for something, but none of the pieces seemed to fit together... or, they fit together, but the picture they made was all wrong. Larry said “no more”—too many dead ends, too many coincidences. But I was already in too deep. I quit the Bureau. I made the Mystery Line my purpose in life. That's when I was brought to Crampton.

MULDER
What do you mean, “brought”?

RICKY SMITH
The same way they used Larry's murder to bring you to Crampton. One thing just sort of leads to another. A map, a murder, a phone call, a message in a fortune cookie. They've got all the gimmicks. They're very good at getting you to do what they want. As I drove toward the town I knew that I'd been here before. I knew it. Here, or someplace very much like it. There's more than one Crampton in the world, that I'm sure of. Anyway, I snooped around for while, like you did. And then I went to that old

ruin of a hall. But I wasn't alone there. I didn't exactly see anyone or anything, but I could feel something lurking around me, running away when I wasn't looking. Leading me, it seemed, from room to room. I came across a tiny office with a desk and a phone. The phone was disconnected, I could see that. I don't know what made me pick up the receiver and put it to my ear.

Mulder and Scully exchange a brief look.

RICKY SMITH

When I did I heard... something. A voice. Or maybe more than one voice. Telling me things that didn't make any sense, not in any literal way. But it scared me. And in those days nothing scared me. I slammed down the receiver fast. I should have gotten out of there right then, and I probably still could have. But I let it lead me on further and further into this darkness that seemed to be massing around me. Finally I was standing on the stage of the hall, right where the curtain comes together. Even at that point, I think I

could have turned and walked away without any serious consequences. But I had to look behind the curtain. I had to know what was hiding there in all that blackness. I had to know. And the strangest thing was finding out that I already knew.

Ricky stops, but it's clear he wants to say more. He just needs to have it dragged out of him.

MULDER
What was it? What did you know?

RICKY SMITH
It's very hard to put into words. I think you, of all people, should be able to understand that, Agent Mulder. But what I felt, looking into that blackness behind the curtain... it seemed that I could hear the blackness, that I could touch it.

Ricky is building steam, his narrative fueled by some reservoir of manic energy. He speaks faster, waving his hands.

RICKY SMITH
I understood that there was something at work at the heart of things

—no, not something at work, but something at play. Something that was playing, putting on a show—a flimsy, pointless, hokey stageshow. And I realized then that the only thing that kept the show going was this mindless, relentless urge...

SCULLY
Urge for what?

RICKY SMITH
For more play. Just to play and play and play. Pure play for the hell of it. Pure magic. And pure illusion. I don't have any names to give you. I wish I did. That always makes it easier to take. I could say it's the Bavarian Illuminati or the Council on Foreign Relations or the Prince of Darkness, but I'd be kidding myself, picking a name out of a hat for the sake of having something to call them. From our point of view their power is unthinkable, literally. Our brains just aren't wired to handle it. That's what killed those people. They called the Mystery Line to get the truth. And they got it.

MULDER
So what is the truth, Ricky?

RICKY SMITH
The truth is, there is no truth. Everything is mutable. Provisional. They can change the entire landscape of things—make things happen that couldn't possibly happen. Or even undo something that's already happened. Not just here, in Crampton, but anywhere, everywhere they can find an audience. Build a stage. Put on the act. We don't get to see the big picture—and sometimes it's very big indeed. Worldwide repercussions. That sort of thing. But in the end it all gets swept under the table—we blame it on some nut in a shack, or terrorists.

Mulder and Scully look at each other uncomfortably at the word "terrorists."

RICKY SMITH
With so much power, though, there's really nothing for them to do except play. Push a button, pull a string, just to see what moves on the other end. That's what the truth is, Agent Mulder. Once I knew that, once I knew their secret... well,

here I am. And I'm not going anywhere. When you know how it's all done, when you know the secret—it's all over.

And so is Ricky's story. The manic energy that fueled its telling apparently spent, he slouches in his chair.

RICKY SMITH
I really hope for your sake that they don't let you in on it. I really mean that. They're always looking for superior playmates, and you two would seem to fit the bill. But if you don't get out of Crampton before this magic show...

SCULLY
Well, what about you? You're welcome to come with us when we go.

RICKY SMITH
(with a humorless smile)
There's nowhere to go, not for me, at least. Besides—

He turns the magic show flyer over. On the back, written in neat, ancient letters: “Admit One.”

RICKY SMITH
—my ticket's already paid for.

Ricky looks at his watch.

RICKY SMITH
(forcing an animated tone)
Hey, it's getting late. If you two are going to make Cincinnati tonight, you'd better hit the road now.

EXT. YELLOW HOUSE - NIGHT

Mulder and Scully get into their car. In the doorway, Ricky watches. For a second, a look crosses his face. Hope, perhaps. Then the look is gone, replaced by one of weary resignation. As Mulder and Scully drive away, Ricky closes the door.

INT. CAR

Mulder and Scully.

MULDER
Well, Scully, what do you think of that?

SCULLY
I think I'm ready to upgrade my diagnosis from delusional to full-blown paranoia.

MULDER
I'm not sure I agree, Scully. Sure, Ricky's story is out there, but the basic idea that things aren't what they seem is pretty much the rationale followed by all serious investigators—be they scientists, philosophers, even FBI agents. The only thing that distinguishes Ricky's perspective is his conviction that there's some sort of design or intent behind the facts as we know them. But it's all the same thing—it's just a matter of scale.

By the look on her face, it is clear Scully is unconvinced.

MULDER
Look, all we know, all we can ever know, is based on what we can see, what we can touch, right? But it's not real. Our senses simply collect this information and then our brains compose it into some mock-up of reality.

SCULLY
Mulder, is this little speech going somewhere?

MULDER
What if you could know things as they really are? Not just as they're processed by our senses and assembled in our brains, but as the world really looks? I think Ricky Smith, when he came to this town, got a look at things as they really are. And I don't think he liked what he saw.

SCULLY
Then why doesn't he just leave? You don't really believe he likes it there in that house, do you?

MULDER
I don't think he has a choice. The filth. The potted meat. I think something's been keeping him there. Feeding him. Keeping him alive. Why, I don't know.

EXT. OASIS MOTEL - NIGHT

The agents' car pulls into the parking lot.

INT. SCULLY's MOTEL ROOM

From the amount of steam in the room and the sound of RUNNING WATER, it looks like Scully is fi-

nally taking that shower. The phone starts to RING; it is an ancient Princess model with a ring like a fire alarm. At the third RING there is a muffled CURSE from inside the bathroom. The WATER stops.

CUT TO:

INT. MULDER's MOTEL ROOM

Mulder is lounging on the bed flipping through TV channels. Through the thin wall, the RING of Scully's phone can be barely heard. Mulder doesn't seem to notice.

Click: An old black-and-white cartoon.

Click: Some artsy-looking thing, shot in negative exposure and accompanied by AIRY SYNTH MUSIC.

Click: STATIC, with a hint of a human image behind.

Click: Another old cartoon.

CUT TO:

INT. SCULLY's MOTEL ROOM

After two more RINGS, Scully comes out of the bathroom wrapped in a long bathrobe, her hair in a towel.

Scully's POV: She is trying to get to the phone, but the mist seems to have thickened, and she can't quite seem to cover the eight or so steps to the RINGING telephone. She keeps getting set back.

Suddenly she finds herself with the telephone in her hand, held up to her ear. She looks surprised.

SCULLY
Hello?

There are vague NOISES on the other end of the line, but no reply.

SCULLY
Hello?

The NOISES seem to coalesce into something like a human VOICE, or SEVERAL VOICES not quite in synch. They are speaking in what might be another language, not making any sense. The speech is full of hisses and grunts. Still, Scully seems mesmerized for a mo-

ment. Then the spell breaks, and she SLAMS the phone down.

CUT TO:

INT. MULDER's MOTEL ROOM

Mulder is still surfing through TV channels.

Click: An infomercial for a set of encyclopedias called “The Lure of the Unknown.”

VOICEOVER (on the television)
Do you really want to know the truth about Bigfoot? The Lost City of Atlantis? Flying saucers? “The Lure of the Unknown” has the answers.

On the SCREEN, the picture changes: A thin BLOND MAN appears. The poor reception makes him look gruesome, cadaverous. He looks right into the camera, almost looking through the television.

BLOND MAN
(in the same voice)
We only have one question: Do you really want to know?

The man on screen holds his pose uncomfortably long. Mulder finally changes the channel. Click: the infomercial again.

BLOND MAN
Do you really want to know?

Click: the infomercial.

BLOND MAN
Do you really want to know?

Mulder scans through the channels faster. Click.

BLOND MAN
—really want to know?

Click.

BLOND MAN
—want to know?

Click.

BLOND MAN
—to know?

Click.

BLOND MAN
—know?

Click.

BLOND MAN
—know?

Click: The thin man is replaced by a silent and grainy video of a man and a woman talking. The angle is odd, though, shot from about waist level and looking almost straight up. Disoriented by the odd point of view, it takes Mulder a moment to recognize the two people: himself and Scully, talking in the autopsy room earlier that day, as seen through Larry Johnson's dead eyes.

CUT TO:

INT. SCULLY's MOTEL ROOM

Scully, in sweats, opens the door to her room. Mulder is outside with his overnight bag.

MULDER
Call me paranoid, but I think it might be a good idea if we didn't stay in separate rooms tonight.

SCULLY
Come on in.

Mulder steps in.

SCULLY
I'll warn you, the TV doesn't work.

MULDER
No problem.

The door SLAMS shut.

INT. SCULLY's MOTEL ROOM, LATER

The two agents are asleep, Scully in her bed, Mulder in a chair. They are restless—having bad dreams.

CUT TO:

INT. ELEVATOR

Mulder and Scully stand together in an elevator, not unlike the one in FBI headquarters. Their stance is awkward and oddly posed: Mulder is smiling, Scully looks annoyed. Treacly elevator MUZAK is playing a familiar but unidentifiable tune.

CUT TO:

INT. MOTEL ROOM

CLOSE UP on Mulder. He is twitching slightly.

CUT TO:

INT. ELEVATOR

The elevator stops. The doors open a few inches. We get a glimpse of faintly ROARING blackness on the other side. The treacly music has been replaced by a CALLIOPE playing the same elusively familiar tune.

CUT TO:

INT. MOTEL ROOM

CLOSE UP on Scully. Her face is twisted into a look of pain.

CUT TO:

INT. ELEVATOR

The doors open a little more, revealing more of the abysmal blackness. In the elevator, the agents look at each other apprehensively. A few more inches. The faint roar has become a HOWL. The agents make a move as if to step through the doors...

CUT TO:

INT. MOTEL ROOM

The HOWL in the dream becomes the cacophonous RINGING of the phone. Both agents wake with a start and sit bolt upright. The phone RINGS again. Mulder picks it up.

MULDER
Hello?
(no reply)
Hello?

VOICE ON PHONE
Hello? Hello?

Mulder turns his eyes to Scully. The VOICE on the phone is hers, though nearly inaudible behind vague background NOISES. Then the voice changes slightly—a near-perfect imitation of Scully's, but muffled, as though spoken through clenched teeth.

VOICE ON PHONE
Three o'clock. Showtime.

Mulder and Scully look at the motel clock: its green luminescent hands point to three a.m.

VOICE ON PHONE
You don't want to miss it.

The voice fades into HISSES and POPS.

FADE OUT

END OF ACT THREE

ACT FOUR

FADE IN:

INT. SCULLY's MOTEL ROOM

Mulder is calling Ricky on Scully's cell phone. After a number of RINGS, the line is PICKED UP by an answering machine. The VOICE on the recording is not Ricky's.

ANSWERING MACHINE (ON THE PHONE)
Hi, kids! We've all gone to the magic show! See you there!

The machine hangs up. Scully comes in, holding a manila envelope.

MULDER
(a bit dazed)
I got his machine.

SCULLY
His machine? Mulder, he didn't even have a phone—how could you get a machine?

MULDER
Any luck with the manager?

SCULLY
He wasn't there.

MULDER
So much for always being at the disposal of his guests.

SCULLY
I found this, though.

She hands Mulder the manila envelope. It is labeled “FOR THE NEWLYWEDS.” Mulder removes its contents: a photograph of Mulder and Scully posed together—Mulder smiling, Scully looking annoyed. It is identical to their positions in the elevator dream.

MULDER
Scully, I had this dream—

SCULLY
(interrupting)
Did it have an elevator in it?

Mulder is speechless. From outside, strains of CALLIOPE MUSIC can be heard. The song is familiar, but strangely elusive. The agents step out of the room.

EXT. OASIS MOTEL - NIGHT

The town of Crampton is all but dead but for one building: a few blocks down, the agents can see the Masonic Hall, still every inch a ruin from the outside, is brightly lit within. It is from here that the CALLIOPE MUSIC comes.

INT. MASONIC HALL

Mulder and Scully burst into the hall to find the Spectacular Display of Illusion and Ventriloquism has started without them. No longer a filthy ruin, the inside of the hall seems completely restored, with intricate ceilingwork, thick-glassed lamps, and a rich, ornate curtain.

The audience is a collection of New York theater first- nighters, carney types, show-business types—all kinds of stereotyped and fraudulent beings. Grinning clowns are work-

ing the crowd doing petty sleight-of-hand tricks. The unctuous CALLIOPE MUSIC plays just a little too loud. On stage, a VENTRILOQUIST is performing in an outrageously smarmy manner. On his knee is "Laffo."

Mulder and Scully lurk at the back of the audience. The magician-ventriloquist ends his bit with a shrill TITTER from "Laffo." An unseen EMCEE's VOICE fills the room.

EMCEE (O.S.)
And now, ladies and gentlemen, the moment you've all been waiting for, the centerpiece of our display: The Metamorphosis!

The crowd APPLAUDS. The calliope music disappears and is replaced by treacly MUZAK cranked to distorting. The KID from the Fix-It shop rolls a platform onto the stage: on it, a human FIGURE is tied to a frame, its arms and legs outspread, its head constrained by a band tied around it and a taut cord leading to the top of the frame. The figure is dressed from head to toe in a skel-

eton suit with an X taped across its mouth.

MULDER
Jesus, Scully, I think that's Ricky!

Mulder and Scully try to move toward the stage but cannot seem to get any closer—for every person they nudge aside, two seem to move to block their path. They draw their sidearms.

SCULLY
FBI!

MULDER
Federal agents! Get out of the way!

Strangely, their shouts cannot seem to draw the audience's attention away from “The Metamorphosis,” which the trapped agents can only watch in glimpses from between shifting bodies...

On stage, a tuxedoed MAGICIAN with handsome yet forgettable features is rolling the platform from one side of the stage to the other and then twirling it around. Finally it is brought to a dead stop. With a stagey flourish the stage magician

tears away the X across the figure's mouth. The skeleton figure emits a continuous tormented SCREAM.

In one swift movement the illusionist tears away the skeleton suit from the neck downward, revealing nothing but empty air underneath. The crowd OOHS, as the cowled head keeps SCREAMING. The illusionist then tears away the hood of the skeleton suit, leaving only a skull dangling from a cord; however, the SCREAMING continues for a few moments before fading into the ROAR of the jubilant crowd.

The illusionist takes his bows, the music goes TA-DA!, and within moments the hall has emptied.

INT. MASONIC HALL, ON THE STAGE

The curtains draw closed and the house lights go dim just as the agents finally reach the stage. Their guns still drawn, they part the curtain slightly.

On the other side: ROARING blackness.

Mulder and Scully look at each other apprehensively.

SCULLY
Ricky said that he thought he could have turned back here. That he still had a choice.

MULDER
I'm not sure we do.

Mulder steps through the curtain into the ROARING blackness. Scully is right behind him.

CUT TO:

INT. FBI HEADQUARTERS

Mulder and Scully step out of the elevator into chaos: FBI agents and EMS personnel are swarming around the office. Mulder and Scully look a bit unsteady, as if stepping off a pitching boat onto dry land.

MULDER
(to the nearest agents)
What's going on?

AGENT
You don't want to know.

ANOTHER AGENT
It was Johnson.

MULDER
Larry Johnson?

EMS personnel wheel a gurney past them—on it, Larry Johnson. He is straining at the leather straps that bind him to the stretcher.

AGENT
I think he had a breakdown or something. Just started screaming. I've never heard anybody scream like that before.

Mulder walks over to Johnson's cubicle. The chair is knocked over, papers and office supplies are scattered all over the floor. On the desk is a sheaf of black-and-white photographs. Mulder picks these up for a better look. Obviously overexposed, they depict only yawning blackness.

SCULLY (O.S.)
Did you know him, Mulder?

Looking at the photos, Mulder seems to be trying to remember something.

SCULLY (O.S.)
Mulder?

Whatever it was he was trying to remember, Mulder finally lets it go. He drops the photographs back onto Johnson's desk. They land on a manila envelope; the return address, written in neat, ancient letters: “Crampton, OH.”

MULDER
I worked a case with him and his partner. It was a long time ago.

He turns and walks away from the scene.

MULDER
So, seriously, you never saw The Manchurian Candidate?

SCULLY
(following)
Nope.

MULDER
Never?

SCULLY
What did I just say?

MULDER
Jeez, Scully, it's only like the best conspiracy movie of all time.

SCULLY
I thought that was JFK—which you never saw.

MULDER
Yeah, but I know how it ends.

FADE TO BLACK.

THE END

The Shadow, The Darkness (2007 Teatro Grottesco Version)

First published in *999: New Stories Of Horror And Suspense*, 1999
Also published in: *Teatro Grottesco*.

It seemed that Grossvogel was charging us entirely too much money for what he was offering. Some of us—we were about a dozen in all—blamed ourselves and our own idiocy as soon as we arrived in that place which one neatly dressed old gentleman immediately dubbed the 'nucleus of nowhere.' This same gentleman, who a few days before had announced to several persons his abandonment of poetry due to the lack of what he considered proper appreciation of his innovative practice of the 'Hermetic lyric,' went on to say that such a place as the one in which we found ourselves was exactly what we should have expected, and probably what we idiots and failures deserved. We had no reason to expect anything more, he explained, than to end up in the dead town of Crampton, in a nowhere region of the country, of the world in fact, during a dull season of the year that was pinched between such a lavish and brilliant autumn and what promised to be an equally lavish and brilliant wintertime. We were trapped, he said, completely stranded for all practical purposes, in a region of the country, and of the entire world, where all the manifestations of that bleak time of year, or rather its absence of manifestations, were so evident in the

landscape around us, where everything was absolutely stripped to the bone, and where the pathetic emptiness of forms in their unadorned state was so brutally evident. When I pointed out that Grossvogel's brochure for this excursion, which he deemed a ‘physical-metaphysical excursion,’ did not strictly misrepresent our destination I received only evil looks from several of the others at the table where we sat, as well as from the nearby tables of the small, almost miniature diner in which the whole group of us were now packed, filling it to capacity with the presence of exotic out-of-towners who, when they stopped bickering for a few moments, simply stared with a killing silence out the windows at the empty streets and broken-down buildings of the dead town of Crampton. The town was further maligned as a ‘drab abyss,’ the speaker of this phrase being a skeletal individual who always introduced himself as a ‘defrocked academic.’ This self-designation would usually provoke a query addressed to him as to its meaning, after which he would, in so many words, elaborate on how his failure to skew his thinking to the standards of, as he termed it, the ‘intellectual marketplace,’ along with his failure to conceal his unconventional studies and methodologies, had resulted in his longtime inability to secure a position within a reputable academic institution, or within any sort of institution or place of business whatever. Thus, in his mind, his failure was more or less his ultimate distinction, and in this sense he was typical of those of us who were seated at the few tables and upon stools along the counter of that miniature diner, complaining that Grossvogel had charged us entirely too much money and to some degree misrepresented, in his

brochure, the whole value and purpose of the excursion to the dead town of Crampton.

Taking my copy of Grossvogel's brochure from the back pocket of my trousers, I unfolded its few pages and laid them before the other three people who were seated at the same table as I. Then I removed my fragile reading glasses from the pocket of the old cardigan I was wearing beneath my even older jacket in order to scrutinize these pages once again, confirming the suspicions I had had about their meaning.

'If you're looking for the fine print –' said the man seated to my left, a 'photographic portraitist' who often broke into a spate of coughing whenever he began to speak, as he did on this occasion.

'What I think my friend was going to say,' said the man seated on my right, 'was that we have been the victims of a subtle and intricate swindle. I say this on his behalf because this is the direction in which his mind works, am I right?'

'A metaphysical swindle,' confirmed the man on my left, who had ceased coughing for the moment.

'Indeed, a metaphysical swindle,' repeated the other man somewhat mockingly. 'I would never have imagined myself being taken in by such a thing, given my experience and special field of knowledge. But this, of course, was such a subtle and intricate operation.'

While I knew that the man on my right was the author of an unpublished philosophical treatise entitled An Investigation into the Conspiracy against the Human Race, I was not sure what he meant by the mention of his 'experience and special field of knowledge.' Before I could inquire about this

issue, I was brashly interrupted by the woman seated across the table from me.

'Mr Reiner Grossvogel is a fraud, it's as simple as that,' she said loud enough for everyone in the diner to hear. 'I've been aware of his fraudulent character for some time, as you know. Even before his so-called "metamorphic experience," or whatever he calls it –'

'Metamorphic recovery,' I said by way of correction.

'Fine, his metamorphic recovery, whatever that's supposed to mean. Even before that time I could see that he was somebody who had all the makings of a fraud. He only required the proper conjunction of circumstances to bring this trait out in him. And then along came that supposedly near-fatal illness of his that he says led to that, I can barely say it, metamorphic recovery. After that he was able to realize all his unused talents for being the fraud he was always destined to be and always wanted to be. I joined in this farcical excursion, or whatever it is, only for the satisfaction of seeing everyone else find out what I always knew and always maintained about Reiner Grossvogel. You're all my witnesses,' she finished, her wrinkled and heavily made-up eyes scanning our faces, and those of the others in the diner, for the affirmation she sought.

I knew this woman only by her professional name of Mrs Angela. Until recently she had operated what everyone among our circle referred to as a 'psychic coffeehouse' which, in addition to other goods and services, was known for its excellent pastries that she made herself, or at least claimed that she made, off the premises. Nevertheless, the business never seemed to prosper either on the strength of its psychic readings, which were performed by several per-

sons in Mrs Angela's employ, or on the strength of its excellent pastries and somewhat overpriced coffee. It was Mrs Angela who first complained about the quality of both the service and the modest fare being offered to us in the Crampton diner. Not long after we arrived that afternoon and immediately packed ourselves into what seemed to be the town's only active place of business, Mrs Angela called out to the young woman whose lonely task it was to cater to our group. 'This coffee is incredibly bitter,' she shouted at the girl, who was dressed in what appeared to be a brand-new white uniform. 'And these donuts are stale, every one of them. What kind of place is this? I think this whole town and everything in it is a fraud.'

When the girl came over to our table and stood before us I noticed that her uniform resembled that of a nurse more than it did an outfit worn by a waitress in a diner. Specifically it reminded me of the uniforms that I saw worn by the nurses at the hospital where Grossvogel was treated for, and ultimately recovered from, what appeared at the time to be a very serious illness. While Mrs Angela was berating the waitress over the quality of the coffee and donuts we had been served, which were included in the travel package that Grossvogel's brochure described as the 'ultimate physical-metaphysical excursion,' I was reviewing my memories of Grossvogel in that stark and conspicuously out-of-date hospital where he had been treated, however briefly, some two years preceding our visit to the dead town of Crampton. He had been admitted to this wretched facility through its emergency room, which was simply the rear entrance to what was not so much a hospital, properly speaking, but more a makeshift clinic set up in an old building located in

the decayed neighborhood where Grossvogel and most of those who knew him were forced to live due to our limited financial means. I myself was the one who took him, in a taxi, to this emergency room and provided the woman at the admittance desk with all the pertinent information regarding Grossvogel, since he was in no condition to do so himself. Later I explained to a nurse—whom I could not help looking upon merely as an emergency-room attendant in a nurse's uniform, given that she seemed somehow lacking in medical expertise—that Grossvogel had collapsed at a local art gallery during a modest exhibit of his works. This was his first experience, I told the nurse, both as a publicly exhibited artist and as a victim of a sudden physical collapse. However, I did not mention that the art gallery to which I referred might have been more accurately depicted as an empty storefront that now and then was cleaned up and used for exhibitions or artistic performances of various types. Grossvogel had been complaining throughout the evening of abdominal pains, I informed the nurse, and then repeated to an emergency-room physician, who also struck me as another medical attendant rather than as a legitimate doctor of medicine. The reason these abdominal pains had increased throughout that evening, I speculated to both the nurse and the doctor, was perhaps Grossvogel's increasing sense of anxiety at seeing his works exhibited for the first time, since he had always been notoriously insecure about his talents as an artist and, in my opinion, had good reason to be. On the other hand there might possibly have been a serious organic condition involved, I allowed when speaking with the nurse and later with the doctor. In any case, Grossvogel had finally collapsed on the floor of the art gallery and

had been unable to do anything but groan somewhat pitifully and, to be honest, somewhat irritatingly since that time.

After listening to my account of Grossvogel's collapse, the doctor instructed the artist to lie down upon a gurney that stood at the end of a badly lighted hallway, while both the doctor and the nurse walked off in the opposite direction. I stood close by Grossvogel during the time that he lay upon this gurney in the shadows of that makeshift clinic. It was the middle of the night by then, and Grossvogel's moaning had abated somewhat, only to be replaced by what I understood at that time as a series of delirious utterances. In the course of this rhetorical delirium, the artist mentioned several times something that he called the 'pervasive shadow.' I told him that it was merely the poor illumination of the hallway, my own words sounding somewhat delirious to me due to the fatigue brought on by the events of that night, both at the art gallery and in the emergency room of that tawdry hospital. Afterward I just stood there listening to Grossvogel murmur at intervals, no longer responding to his delirious and increasingly elaborate utterances about the 'pervasive shadow that causes things to be what they would not be' or the 'all-moving darkness that makes things do what they would not do.'

After an hour or so of listening to Grossvogel, I noticed that the doctor and nurse were now standing close together at the other end of that dark hallway. They seemed to be conferring with each other for the longest time and every so often one or both of them would look in the direction where I was standing close by the prostrate and murmuring Grossvogel. I wondered how long they were going to carry on with

what seemed to me a medical charade, a clinical dumbshow, while the artist lay moaning and now more frequently murmuring on the subject of the shadow and the darkness. Perhaps I dozed off on my feet for a moment, because it seemed that from out of nowhere the nurse was suddenly at my side and the doctor was no longer anywhere in sight. The nurse's white uniform now appeared almost luminous in the dingy shadows of that hallway. ‘You can go home now,’ she said to me. ‘Your friend is going to be admitted to the hospital.’ She then pushed Grossvogel on his gurney toward the doors of an elevator at the end of the hallway. As soon as she reached these elevator doors they opened quickly and silently, pouring the brightest light into that dim hallway. When the doors were fully opened I could see the doctor standing inside. He pulled Grossvogel's stretcher into the brilliantly illuminated elevator while the nurse pushed the stretcher from behind. As soon as they were all inside, the elevator doors closed quickly and silently, and the hallway in which I was still standing seemed even darker and more dense with shadows than it had before.

The following day I visited Grossvogel at the hospital. He had been placed in a small private room in a distant corner of the institution's uppermost floor. As I walked toward this room, looking for the number I had been given at the information desk downstairs, it seemed to me that none of the other rooms on that floor had any patients occupying them. It was only when I found the number I sought that I looked inside and actually saw a bed that was occupied, conspicuously so, since Grossvogel was a rather large-bodied individual who took up the full length and breadth of an old and sagging mattress. He seemed quite giantlike lying on that

undersized, institutional mattress in that small, windowless room. There was barely enough space for me to squeeze myself between the wall and the bedside of the artist, who seemed to be still in much the same delirious condition as he had been the night before. There was no sign of recognition on his part that I was in the same room, although we were so close that I was practically on top of him. Even after I spoke his name several times his teary gaze betrayed no notice of my presence. However, as I began to sidle away from his bedside I was startled when Grossvogel firmly grabbed my arm with his enormous left hand, which was the hand he used for painting and drawing the works of his which had been exhibited in the storefront art gallery the previous evening. 'Grossvogel,' I said expectantly, thinking that finally he was going to respond, if only to speak about the pervasive shadow (that causes things to be what they would not be) and the all-moving darkness (that causes things to do what they would not do). But a few seconds later his hand became limp and fell from my arm onto the very edge of the misshapen institutional mattress on which his body again lay still and unresponsive.

After some moments I made my way out of Grossvogel's private room and walked over to the nurse's station on the same floor of the hospital to inquire about the artist's medical condition. The sole nurse in attendance listened to my request and consulted a folder with the name Reiner Grossvogel typed in one of its upper corners. After studying me some time longer than she had studied the pages concerning the artist, and now hospital patient, she simply said, 'Your friend is being observed very closely.'

'Is that all you can tell me?' I asked.

‘His tests haven't been returned. You might ask about them later.’

‘Later today?’

‘Yes, later today,’ she said, taking Grossvogel's folder and walking away into another room. I heard the squeaking sound of a drawer in an old filing cabinet being opened and then suddenly being slammed shut again. For some reason I stood there waiting for the nurse to emerge from the room where she had taken Grossvogel's medical folder. Finally I gave up and returned home.

When I called the hospital later that day I was told that Grossvogel had been released. ‘He's gone home?’ I said, which was the only thing that occurred to me to say. ‘We have no way of knowing where he's gone,’ the woman who answered the phone replied just before hanging up on me. Nor did anyone else know where Grossvogel had gone, for he was not at his home, and no one among our circle had any knowledge of his whereabouts.

It was several weeks, perhaps more than a month, after Grossvogel's release from the hospital, and apparent disappearance, that several of us had gathered, purely by chance, at the storefront art gallery where the artist had collapsed during the opening night of his first exhibit. By this time even I had ceased to be concerned in any way with Grossvogel or the fact that he had without warning simply dropped out of sight. Certainly he was not the first to do so among our circle, all of whom were more or less unstable, sometimes dangerously volatile persons who might involve themselves in questionable activities for the sake of some artistic or intellectual vision, or simply out of pure desperation of spirit. I think that the only reason any of us mentioned

Grossvogel's name as we drifted about the art gallery that afternoon was the fact that his works still remained on exhibit, and wherever we turned we were confronted by some painting or drawing of his which, in a pamphlet issued to accompany the show, I myself had written were ‘manifestations of a singularly gifted artistic visionary,’ when in fact they were without exception quite run-of-the-mill specimens of the sort of artistic nonsense that, for reasons unknown to all concerned, will occasionally gain a measure of success or even a high degree of prominence for their creator. ‘What am I supposed to do with all this junk?’ complained the woman who owned, or perhaps only rented, the storefront building that had been set up as an art gallery. I was about to say to her that I would take responsibility for removing Grossvogel's works from the gallery, and perhaps even store them somewhere for a time, when the skeletal person who always introduced himself as a defrocked academic interjected, suggesting to the agitated owner (or least operator) of the art gallery that she should send them to the hospital where Grossvogel had ‘supposedly been treated’ after his collapse. When I asked why he had used the word ‘supposedly,’ he replied, ‘I've long believed that place to be a dubious institution, and I'm not the only one to hold this view.’ I then asked if there was any credible basis for this belief of his, but he only crossed his skeletal arms and looked at me as if I had just insulted him in some way. ‘Mrs Angela,’ he said to a woman who was standing nearby, studying one of Grossvogel's paintings as if she were seriously considering it for purchase. At that time Mrs Angela's psychic coffeehouse had yet to prove itself a failed venture, and possibly she was thinking that Grossvogel's works, although inferior from an artistic

standpoint, might in some way complement the ambience of her place of business, where patrons could sit at tables and receive advice from hired psychic counselors while also feasting on an array of excellent pastries.

‘You should listen to what he says about that hospital,’ Mrs Angela said to me without taking her eyes off that painting of Grossvogel's. ‘I've had a strong feeling about that place for a long time. There is some aspect of it that is extremely devious.’

‘Dubious,’ corrected the defrocked academic.

‘Yes,’ answered Mrs Angela. ‘It's not by any means someplace I'd like to wake up and find myself.’

‘I wrote a poem about it,’ said the neatly dressed gentleman who all this time had been marauding about the floor of the gallery, no doubt waiting for the most propitious moment to approach the woman who owned or rented the storefront building and persuade her to sponsor what he was forever touting as an ‘evening of Hermetic readings,’ which of course would prominently feature his own works. ‘I once read that poem to you,’ he said to the gallery owner.

‘Yes, you read it to me,’ she replied with barely any vocal inflection.

‘I wrote it after being treated in the emergency room of that place very late one night,’ explained the poet.

‘What were you treated for?’ I asked him.

‘Oh, nothing serious. I went home a few hours later. I was never admitted as a patient, I'm glad to say. It was, and I quote from my poem on the subject, the “nucleus of the abysmal.”’

‘That's fine to say that,’ I said. ‘But could we possibly speak in more explicit terms?’

However, before I could draw out a response from the self-styled writer of Hermetic lyrics, the door of the art gallery was suddenly pushed open with a conspicuous force that all of us inside instantly recognized. A moment later we saw standing before us the large-bodied figure of Reiner Grossvogel. Physically he appeared to be, for the most part, much the same person I recalled prior to his collapse on the floor of the art gallery not more than a few feet from where I was now standing, bearing none of the traits of that moaning, delirious creature whom I had taken in a taxi to the hospital for emergency treatment. Nevertheless, there did seem to be something different about him, a subtle but thorough change in the way he looked upon what lay before him: whereas the gaze of the artist had once been characteristically downcast or nervously averted, his eyes now seemed completely direct in their focus and filled with a calm purpose.

'I'm taking away all of this,' he said, gesturing broadly but quite gently toward the artworks of his that filled the gallery, none of which had been sold either on the opening night of his show or during the subsequent period of his disappearance. 'I would appreciate your assistance, if you will give it,' he added as he began taking down paintings and drawings from along the walls.

The rest of us joined him in this endeavor without question or comment, and laden with artworks both large and small we followed him out of the gallery toward a battered pick-up truck parked at the curb in front. Grossvogel casually hurled his works into the back of the rented, or possibly borrowed, truck (since the artist had never been known to possess any kind of vehicle before that day), exhibiting no

concern for the damage that might be incurred on what he had once considered the best examples of his artistic output to date. There was a moment's hesitation on the part of Mrs Angela, who was perhaps still considering how one or more of these works would look in her place of business, but ultimately she too began carrying Grossvogel's works out of the gallery and hurling them into the back of the truck where they piled up like refuse, until the gallery's walls and floor space were entirely cleared and the place looked like any other disused storefront. Grossvogel then got into the truck while the rest us stood in wondering silence outside the emptied art gallery. Putting his head out the open window of the rented or borrowed truck, he called to the woman who ran the gallery. She walked over to the driver's side of the truck and exchanged a few words with the artist before he started the engine of the vehicle and drove off. Returning to where we had remained standing on the sidewalk, she announced to us that, a few weeks hence, there would be a second exhibit of Grossvogel's work at the gallery.

This, then, was the message that was passed among the circle of persons with whom I was associated at the time: that Grossvogel, after physically collapsing from an undisclosed ailment or attack at the first, highly unsuccessful exhibit of his works, was now going to present a second exhibit after summarily cleaning out the art gallery of those rather worthless paintings and drawings of his already displayed to the public and hauling them away in the back of a pick-up truck.

Grossvogel's new exhibit was unusually well advertised by the woman who owned the art gallery and who stood to gain financially from the sale of what, in a phrase used in the

promotional copy for the event, were somewhat awkwardly called ‘radical and revisionary works by the celebrated artistic visionary Reiner Grossvogel.’ Nevertheless, due to the circumstances surrounding both the artist's previous and upcoming exhibits, the whole thing almost immediately devolved into a fog of delirious and sometimes lurid gossip and speculation. This development was wholly in keeping with the nature of those who comprised that circle of dubious, not to mention devious artistic and intellectual persons of which I had unexpectedly become a central figure. After all, it was I who had taken Grossvogel to the hospital following his collapse at the first exhibit of his works, and it was the hospital—already a subject of strange repute, as I discovered—that loomed so prominently within the delirious fog of gossip and speculation surrounding Grossvogel's upcoming exhibit. There was even talk of some special procedures and medications to which the artist had been exposed during his brief confinement at this institution that would account for his unexplained disappearance and subsequent re-emergence in order to perpetrate what many presumed would be a startling ‘artistic vision.’ No doubt it was this expectation, this desperate hope for something of brilliant novelty and lavishly colorful imagination—which in the minds of some overly excitable persons promised to exceed the domain of mere aesthetics, and even extend the bounds of artistic expression—that led to the acceptance among our circle of the unorthodox nature of Grossvogel's new exhibit, as well as accounting for the emotional letdown that followed for those of us in attendance that opening night.

And, in fact, what occurred at the gallery that night in no way resembled the sort of exhibit we were accustomed to at-

tending: the floor of the gallery and the gallery's walls remained as bare as the day when Grossvogel appeared with a pick-up truck to cart off all his works from his old art show, while the new one, we soon discovered after arriving, was to take place in the small back room of the storefront building. Furthermore, we were charged a rather large fee in order to enter this small back room, which was illuminated by only a few lightbulbs of extremely low wattage dangling here and there from the ceiling. One of the lightbulbs was hung in a corner of the room directly above a small table which had a torn section of a bedsheet draped over it to conceal something that was bulging beneath it. Radiating out from this corner with its dim lightbulb and small table were several loosely arranged rows of folding chairs. These uncomfortable chairs were eventually occupied by those of us, about a dozen in all, who were willing to pay the large fee for what seemed to be an event more in the style of a primitive stageshow than anything resembling an art exhibit. I could hear Mrs Angela in one of the seats behind me saying over and over to those around her, ‘What the hell is this?’ Finally she leaned forward and said to me, ‘What does Grossvogel think he's doing? I've heard that he's been medicated to the eyeballs ever since his stay in that hospital.’ Yet the artist appeared lucid enough when a few moments later he made his way through the loosely arranged rows of folding chairs and stood beside the small table with the torn bedsheet draped over it and the low-watt lightbulb dangling above. In the confines of the art gallery's back room, the large-bodied Grossvogel seemed almost gigantic, just as he had when lying upon that institutional mattress in his private room at the hospital. Even his voice, which was usually quiet, even

somewhat wispy, seemed to be enlarged when he began speaking to us.

‘Thank you all for coming here tonight,’ he began. ‘This shouldn't take very long. I have only a few things to say to you and then something that I would like to show you. It's really no less than a miracle that I'm able to stand here and speak to you in this way. Not too long ago, as some of you may recall, I suffered a terrible attack in this very art gallery. I hope you won't mind if I tell you a few things about the nature of this attack and its consequences, things which I feel are essential to appreciating what I have to show you tonight.

‘Well then, let me start by saying that, on one level, the attack I suffered in this art gallery during the opening night of an exhibit of my works was in the nature of a simple gastrointestinal upheaval, even if it was a quite severe episode of its type. For some time this gastrointestinal upheaval, the result of a disorder of my digestive system, had been making its progress within me. Over a period of many years this disorder had been progressively and insidiously developing, on one level, in the depths of my body and, on another level altogether, in the darkest aspect of my being. This period coincided with, and in fact was directly a consequence of, my involvement with the creation of artworks —my intense desire to make art, which is to say, my desire to do something and my desire to be something, that is, an artist. I was attempting during this period I speak of—and for that matter throughout my entire life—to make something with my mind, specifically to create works of art by the only possible means I believed were available to me, which was by using my mind, or by using my imagination or my

creative faculties, some force or function of what people would call a soul or a spirit or simply a personal self. But when I found myself collapsed upon the floor of this art gallery, and later at the hospital, experiencing the most acute abdominal agony, I was overwhelmed by the realization that I had no mind or imagination that I could use, that there was nothing I could call a soul or self—those things were all nonsense and dreams. I realized, in my severe gastrointestinal distress, that the only thing that had any existence at all was this larger-than-average physical body of mine. And I realized that there was nothing for this body to do except to function in physical pain and that there was nothing for it to be except what it was—not an artist or creator of any kind but solely a mass of flesh, a system of tissues and bones and so forth, suffering the agonies of a disorder of its digestive system, and that anything that did not directly stem from these facts, especially producing works of art, was profoundly and utterly false and unreal. At the same time I also became aware of the force that was behind my intense desire to do something and to be something, particularly my desire to create utterly false and unreal works of art. In other words, I became aware of what in reality was activating my body. This realization was not made with my mind or imagination, and certainly it was not made through any such medium as my soul or self, all which are entirely nonsense and dreams. This realization of what was activating my body and its desires was made by the only means possible, this being by way of the human body itself and its organs of physical sensation. This is precisely how the world of non-human bodies has always functioned and functioned so much more successfully than the world of human bodies, which is

forever obstructed by all the nonsense we fabricate about having minds and having souls or selves. The world of non-human bodies is activated directly in accord with the commands of that terrible force underlying all existence which issues only a few simple desires, none of which have to do with anything as nonsensical and dreamlike as creating works of art or of being an artist, of doing or being anything like these profoundly false and unreal things. Thus the world of non-human bodies never need suffer the pains of pursuing false and unreal desires, because such feelings have no relevance for those bodies and never arise within them.'

Before continuing with the introductory talk that comprised the first part of his art exhibit, or artistic stageshow, as I thought of it, Grossvogel paused and for a moment seemed to be surveying the faces of the small audience seated in the back room of the gallery. What he had expressed to us concerning his body and its digestive malfunctions was on the whole comprehensible enough, even if certain points he was articulating seemed at the time to be questionable and his overall discourse somewhat unengaging. Yet we put up with Grossvogel's words, I believe, because we had thought that they were leading us into another, possibly more engaging phase of his experience, which somehow we already sensed was not wholly alienated from our own, whether or not we identified with its peculiarly gastrointestinal nature. Therefore we remained silent, almost respectfully so, considering the unorthodox proceedings of that night, as Grossvogel continued with what he had to tell us before the moment came when he unveiled what he had brought to show us.

‘It is all so very, very simple,’ the artist continued. ‘Our bodies are but one manifestation of the energy, the activating force that sets in motion all the objects, all the bodies of this world and enables them to exist as they do. This activating force is something like a shadow that is not on the outside of all the bodies of this world but is inside of everything and thoroughly pervades everything—an all-moving darkness that has no substance in itself but that moves all the objects of this world, including those objects which we call our bodies. While I was in the throes of my gastrointestinal episode at the hospital where I was treated I descended, so to speak, to that deep abyss of entity where I could feel how this shadow, this darkness was activating my body. I could also hear its movement, not only within my body but in everything around me, because the sound that it made was not the sound of my body—it was the sound of this shadow, this darkness, which is not like any other sound. Likewise I was able to detect the workings of this pervasive and all-moving force through the sense of smell and the sense of taste, as well as the sense of touch with which my body is equipped. Finally I opened my eyes, for throughout much of this agonizing ordeal of my digestive system my eyelids were clenched shut in pain. And when I opened my eyes I found that I could see how everything around me, including my own body, was activated from within by this pervasive shadow, this all-moving darkness. And nothing looked as I had always known it to look. Before that night I had never experienced the world purely by means of my organs of physical sensation, which are the direct point of contact with that deep abyss of entity that I am calling the shadow, the darkness. My false and unreal works as an artist were

merely the evidence of what I concocted with my mind or my imagination, which are basically nonsensical and dream-like fabrications that only interfere with the workings of our senses. I believed that somehow these works of art reflected in some way the nature of my self or my soul, when in actuality they only reflected my deranged and useless desires to do something and to be something, which always means to do and to be something false and unreal. Like everything else, these desires had been activated by the same pervasive shadow, the all-moving darkness which, due to the self-annihilating agony of my gastrointestinal distress, I could now experience directly by means of my sense organs and without the interference of my imaginary mind or my imaginary self.

'I should confess that prior to my physical collapse at this very art gallery I had undergone a psychic collapse—a collapse of something false and unreal, of something nonsensical and dreamlike, it goes without saying, although it was all very genuine and real to me at the time. This collapse of my mind and my self was the result of how poorly my works of art were being received by those attending the opening night of my first exhibit, of how profoundly unsuccessful they were as artistic creations, miserably unsuccessful even in the sphere of false and unreal artistic creations. This unsuccessful exhibit demonstrated to me how thoroughly I had failed in my efforts to be an artist. Everyone at the exhibit could see how unsuccessful my artworks proved to be, and I could see everyone in the very act of witnessing my unmitigated failure as an artist. This was the psychic crisis which precipitated my physical crisis and the eventual collapse of my body into spasms of gastrointestinal torment.

Once my mind and my personal sense of self had broken down, all that was left in operation were my organs of physical sensation, by means of which I was able for the first time to experience directly that deep abyss of entity that is the shadow, the darkness which had activated my intense desire to be a success at doing something and at being something, and thereby also activated my body as it moved within this world, just as all bodies are likewise activated. And what I experienced through direct sensory channels—the spectacle of the shadow inside of everything, the all-moving darkness—was so appalling that I was sure I would cease to exist. In some way, because of the manner in which my senses were now functioning, especially my visual sense, I did in fact cease to exist as I had existed before that night. Without the interference of my mind and my imagination, all that nonsensical dreaming about my soul and my self, I was forced to see things under the aspect of the shadow inside them, the darkness which activated them. And it was wholly appalling, more so than my words could possibly tell you.'

Nevertheless, Grossvogel went on to explain in detail to those of us who had paid the exorbitant price to see his stageshow exhibit the appalling way in which he was forced to see the world around him, including his own body in its gastrointestinal distress, and how convinced he was that this vision of things would soon be the cause of his death, despite the measures taken to save him during his hospital sojourn. It was Grossvogel's contention that his only hope of survival was for him to perish completely, in the sense that the person (or the mind or self) that had once been Grossvogel would actually cease to exist. This necessary condition for survival, he maintained, prompted his physical body to un-

dergo a ‘metamorphic recovery.’ Within a matter of hours, Grossvogel told us, he no longer suffered from the symptoms of acute abdominal pains which had initiated his crisis, and furthermore he was now able to tolerate the way in which he was permanently forced to see things, as he put it, ‘under the aspect of the shadow inside them, the darkness which activated them.’ Since the person who had been Grossvogel had perished, as Grossvogel explained to us, the body of Grossvogel was able to continue as a successful organism untroubled by the imaginary torments that had once been inflicted upon him by his fabricated mind and his false and unreal self. As he put it in his own words, ‘I am no longer occupied with myself or my mind.’ What we in the audience now saw before us, he said, was Grossvogel's body speaking with Grossvogel's voice and using Grossvogel's neurological circuitry but without the interference of the ‘imaginary character’ known as Grossvogel: all of his words and actions, he said, now emanated directly from that same force which activates every one of us if we could only realize it in the way he had been compelled to do in order to keep his body alive. The artist emphasized in his own terribly calm way that in no sense had he chosen his unique course of recovery. No one would willingly choose such a thing, he contended. Everyone prefers to continue their existence as a mind and a self, no matter what pain it causes them, no matter how false and unreal they might be, than to face the quite obvious reality of being only a body set in motion by this mindless, soulless, and selfless force which he designated the shadow, the darkness. Nonetheless, Grossvogel disclosed to us, this was exactly the reality that he needed to admit into his system if his body was to continue its existence and to

succeed as an organism. ‘It was purely a matter of physical survival,’ he said. ‘Everybody should be able to understand that. Anyone would do the same.’ Moreover, the famous metamorphic recovery in which Grossvogel the person died and Grossvogel the body survived was so successful, he informed his stageshow audience, that he immediately embarked upon a strenuous period of travel, mostly by means of inexpensive buslines that took him great distances across and around the entire country, so that he could look at various people and places while exercising his new faculty of being able to see the shadow that pervaded them, the all-moving darkness that activated them, since he was no longer subject to the misconceptions about the world that are created by the mind or imagination—those obstructing mechanisms which were now removed from his system—and nor did he mistakenly imagine anyone or anything to possess a soul or a self. And everywhere he went he witnessed the spectacle that had previously so appalled him to the point of becoming a life-threatening medical condition.

‘I could now know the world directly through the senses of my body,’ Grossvogel continued. ‘And I saw with my body what I could never have seen with my mind or imagination during my career as a failed artist. Everywhere I travelled I saw how the pervasive shadow, the all-moving darkness, was using our world. Because this shadow, this darkness has nothing of its own, no way to exist except as an activating force or energy, whereas we have our bodies, we are only our bodies, whether they are organic bodies or non-organic bodies, human or non-human bodies, makes no difference—they are all simply bodies and nothing but bodies, with no component whatever of a mind or a self or a soul. Hence the

shadow, the darkness uses our world for what it needs to thrive upon. It has nothing except its activating energy, while we are nothing except our bodies. This is why the shadow, the darkness causes things to be what they would not be and to do what they would not do. Because without the shadow inside them, the all-moving blackness activating them, they would be only what they are—heaps of matter lacking any impulse, any urge to flourish, to succeed in this world. This state of affairs should be called what it is—an absolute nightmare. That is exactly what I experienced in the hospital when I realized, due to my intense gastrointestinal suffering, that I had no mind or imagination, no soul or self—that these were nonsensical and dreamlike intermediaries fabricated to protect human beings from realizing what it is we really are: only a collection of bodies activated by the shadow, the darkness. Those among us who are successful organisms to any degree, including artists, are so only by virtue of the extent to which we function as bodies and by no means as minds or selves. This is exactly the manner in which I had failed so exceptionally, since I was profoundly convinced of the existence of my mind and my imagination, my soul and my self. My only hope lay in my ability to make a metamorphic recovery, to accept in every way the nightmarish order of things so that I could continue to exist as a successful organism even without the protective nonsense of the mind and the imagination, the protective dream of having any kind of soul or self. Otherwise I would have been annihilated by a fatally traumatic insanity brought on by the shock of this shattering realization. Therefore the person who was Grossvogel had to perish in that hospital—and good riddance—so that the body of Grossvogel could be free of its

gastrointestinal crisis and go on to travel in all directions by various means of transportation, primarily the inexpensive transportation provided by interstate buslines, witnessing the spectacle of the shadow, the darkness using our world of bodies for what it needs to thrive upon. And after witnessing this spectacle it was inevitable that I should portray it in some form, not as an artist who has failed because he is using some nonsense called the mind or the imagination, but as a body that has succeeded in perceiving how everything in the world actually functions. That is what I have come to show you, to exhibit to you this evening.'

I, who had been lulled or agitated by Grossvogel's discourse as much as anyone in the audience, was for some reason surprised, and even apprehensive, when he suddenly ended his lecture or fantasy monologue or whatever I construed his words to be at the time. It seemed that he could have gone on speaking forever in the back room of that art gallery where low-watt lightbulbs hung down from the ceiling, one of them directly above the table that was covered with a torn section of bedsheet. And now Grossvogel was lifting one corner of the torn bedsheet to show us, at last, what he had created, not by using his mind or imagination, which he claimed no longer existed in him any more than did his soul or self, but by using only his body's organs of physical sensation. When he finally uncovered the piece completely and it was fully displayed in the dull glow of the lightbulb which hung directly above it, none of us demonstrated either a positive or negative reaction to it at first, possibly because our minds were so numbed by all the verbal build-up that had led to this moment of unveiling.

It appeared to be a sculpture of some kind. However, I found it initially impossible to give this object any generic designation, either artistic or non-artistic. It might have been anything. The surface of the piece was uniformly of a shining darkness, having a glossy sheen beneath which was spread a swirling murk of shades that almost seemed to be in motion, an effect which seemed quite credibly the result of some swaying of the lightbulb dangling above. There appeared to be a resemblance in its general outline to some kind of creature, perhaps a grossly distorted version of a scorpion or a crab, since it displayed more than a few claw-like extensions reaching out from a central, highly shapeless mass. But it also appeared to have elements poking upward, peaks or horns that jutted at roughly vertical angles and ended sometimes in a sharp point and sometimes in a soft, headlike bulge. Because Grossvogel had spoken so much about bodies, it was natural to see such forms, in some deranged fashion, as the basis of the object or as being incorporated into it somehow—a chaotic world of bodies of every kind, of shapes activated by the shadow inside them, the darkness that caused them to be what they would not be and to do what they would not do. And among these body-like shapes I recognized distinctly the large-bodied figure of the artist himself, although the significance of the fact that Grossvogel had implanted himself therein escaped me as I sat contemplating this modest exhibit.

Whatever Grossvogel's sculpture may have represented in its parts or as a whole, it contained more than a suggestion of that ‘absolute nightmare’ which the artist, so to speak, had elucidated during his lecture or fantasy monologue earlier that evening. Yet this quality of the piece, even for an

audience that had more than a slight appreciation of nightmarish subjects and contours, was not enough to offset the high price we had been required to pay for the privilege of hearing about Grossvogel's gastrointestinal ordeal and self-proclaimed metamorphic recovery. Soon after the artist unveiled his work to us, each of our bodies rose out of those uncomfortable folding chairs and excuses for departing the premises were being spoken on all sides. Before making my own exit I noticed that inconspicuously displayed next to Grossvogel's sculpture was a small card upon which was printed the title of the piece. TSALAL NO. 1, it read. Later I learned something about the meaning of this term, which, in the way of words, both illuminated and concealed the nature of the thing that it named.

The matter of Grossvogel's sculpture—he subsequently put out a series of several hundred, each of them with the same title followed by a number that placed it in a sequence of artistic production—was discussed at length as we sat waiting in the diner situated on the main street of the dead town of Crampton. The gentleman seated to my left at one of the few tables in the diner reiterated his accusations against Grossvogel.

‘First he subjected us to an artistic swindle,’ said this person who was prone to sudden and protracted coughing spells, ‘and now he has subjected us to a metaphysical swindle. It was unheard of, charging us such a price for that exhibition of his, and now charging us so outrageously once again for this “physical-metaphysical excursion.” We've all been taken in by that –’

‘That absolute fraud,’ said Mrs Angela when the man on my left was unable to complete his statement because he had

broken into another fit of coughing. ‘I don't think he's even going to show up,’ she continued. ‘He induces us to come to this hole-in-the-wall town. He says that this is the place where we need to gather for this excursion of his. But he doesn't show his face anywhere around here. Where did he find this place, on one of those bus tours he was always talking about?’

It seemed that we had only ourselves and our own idiocy to blame for the situation we were in. Even though no one openly admitted it, the truth was that those of us who were present had been very much impressed with Grossvogel on the day when he entered the art gallery and had us assist him in throwing all of his works on exhibit into the back of a battered pick-up truck. None of us in our small circle of artists and intellectuals had ever done anything remotely like that or even dreamed of doing something so drastic and full of drama. From that day it became our unspoken conviction that Grossvogel was on to something and our disgraceful secret that we desired to attach ourselves to him in order to profit in some way by our association with him. At the same time, of course, we also resented Grossvogel's daring behavior and were perfectly ready to welcome another failure on his part, perhaps even another collapse on the floor of the gallery where he and his artworks had already once failed to everyone's thorough satisfaction. Such a confusion of motives was more than enough reason for us to pay the exorbitant fee that Grossvogel charged for his new exhibit, which we afterward dismissed in one way or another.

Following the show that night I stood on the sidewalk outside the art gallery, listening once again to Mrs Angela's implications regarding the true source of Grossvogel's meta-

morphic recovery and artistic inspiration. ‘Mr Reiner Grossvogel has been medicated to the eyeballs ever since he came out of that hospital,’ she said to me as if for the first time. ‘I know one of the girls who works at the drugstore that fills his prescriptions. She's a very good customer of mine,’ she added, her wrinkled and heavily made-up eyes flashing with self-satisfaction. Then she continued her scandalous revelations. ‘I think you might know the kind of medications prescribed for someone with Grossvogel's medical condition, which really isn't a medical condition at all but a psychophysical disorder that I or any of the people who work for me could have told him about a long time ago. Grossvogel's brain has been swimming in all kinds of tranquilizers and anti-depressants for months now, and not only that. He's also been taking an anti-spasmodic compound for that condition of his that he's supposed to have recovered from by such miraculous means. I'm not surprised he doesn't think he has a mind or any kind of self, which is all just an act in any case.

‘Anti-spasmodic,’ Mrs Angela hissed at me as we stood on the sidewalk outside the art gallery following Grossvogel's exhibit. ‘Do you know what that means?’ she asked me and then quickly answered her own question. ‘It means belladonna, a poisonous hallucinogenic. It means phenobarbital, a barbiturate. The girl from the drugstore told me all about it. He's been overdosing himself on all of these drugs, do you understand? That's why he's been seeing things in that peculiar way he would have us believe. It's not some shadow or whatever he says that's activating his body. I would know about something like that, now wouldn't I? I

have a special gift that provides me with insight into things like that.'

But despite her gifts, along with her excellent pastries, Mrs Angela's psychic coffeehouse did not thrive as a business and ultimately went under altogether. On the other hand, Grossvogel's sculptures, which he produced at a prolific pace, were an incredible success, both among local buyers of artistic products and among art merchants and collectors across the country, even reaching an international market to some extent. Reiner Grossvogel was also celebrated in feature articles that appeared in major art magazines and non-artistic publications alike, although he was usually portrayed, in the words of one critic, as a 'one-man artistic and philosophical freakshow.' Nevertheless, Grossvogel was by any measure now functioning as a highly successful organism. And it was due to this success, which had never been approached by anyone else within our small circle of artists and intellectuals, that those of us who had abandoned Grossvogel upon hearing him lecture on his metamorphic recovery from a severe gastrointestinal disorder and viewing the first in his prodigious Tsalal series of sculptures now once again attached ourselves and our failed careers to him and his unarguably successful body without a mind or a self. Even Mrs Angela eventually became conversant with the 'realizations' that Grossvogel had first espoused in the back room of that storefront art gallery and now disseminated in what seemed an unending line of philosophical pamphlets, which became almost as sought after by collectors as his series of Tsalal sculptures. Thus, when Grossvogel issued a certain brochure among the small circle of artists and intellectuals which he had never abandoned even after he had

achieved such amazing financial success and celebrity, a brochure announcing a ‘physical-metaphysical excursion’ to the dead town of Crampton, we were more than willing once more to pay the exorbitant price he was asking.

This was the brochure to which I referred the others seated at the table with me in the Crampton diner: the photographic portraitist who was subject to coughing jags on my left, the author of the unpublished philosophical treatise An Investigation into the Conspiracy against the Human Race on my right, and Mrs Angela directly across from me. The man on my left was still reiterating, with prolonged interruptions of his coughing (which I will here delete), the charge that Grossvogel had perpetrated a ‘metaphysical swindle’ with his high-priced ‘physical-metaphysical excursion.’

‘All of Grossvogel's talk about that business with the shadow and the blackness and the nightmare world he purportedly was seeing… and then where do we end up—in some godforsaken town that went out of business a long time ago, and in some part of the country where everything looks like an overexposed photograph. I have my camera with me ready to create portraits of faces that have looked upon Grossvogel's shadowy blackness, or whatever he was planning for us to do here. I've even thought of several very good titles and concepts for these photographic portraits which I imagine would have a good chance of being published together as a book, or at least a portfolio in a leading photography magazine. I thought that at the very least I might have taken back with me a series of photographic portraits of Grossvogel, with that huge face of his. I could have placed that with almost any of the better art magazines. But

where is the celebrated Grossvogel? He said he would be here to meet us. He said we would find out everything about that shadow business, as I understood him. Furthermore, I have my head prepared for those absolute nightmares that Grossvogel prattled on about in his pamphlets and in that highly deceptive brochure of his.'

'This brochure,' I said during one of the man's more raucous intervals of hacking, 'makes no explicit promises about any of those things you've imagined to be contained there. It specifically announces that this is to be an excursion, and I quote, to a "dead town, a finished town, a failed town, a false and unreal setting that is the product of unsuccessful organisms and therefore a town that is exemplary of that extreme state of failure that may so distress human organic systems, particularly the gastrointestinal system, to the point of weakening its delusional and totally fabricated defenses—e.g. the mind, the self—and thus precipitating a crisis of nightmare realization involving... ," and I think we're all familiar with the shadow-and darkness talk which follows. The point is, Grossvogel promises nothing in this brochure except an environment redolent of failure, a sort of hothouse for failed organisms. The rest of it is entirely born of your own imaginations... and my own, I might add.'

'Well,' said Mrs Angela, pulling the brochure I had placed on the table toward her, 'did I imagine reading that, and I quote, "suitable dining accommodations will be provided"? Bitter coffee and stale donuts are not what I consider suitable. Grossvogel is now a rich man, as everybody knows, and this is the best he can do? Until the day I closed down my business for good, I served superlative coffee, not to mention superlative pastries, even if I now admit that I didn't make

them myself. And my psychic readings, mine and those of all my people, were as breathtaking as they come. Meanwhile, the rich man and that waitress there are practically poisoning us with this bitter coffee and these incredibly stale, cut-rate donuts. What I could use at this moment is some of that anti-spasmodic medicine Grossvogel's been taking in such liberal doses for so long. And I'm sure he'll have plenty of it with him if he ever shows his face around here, which I doubt he will after making us sick with his suitable dining accommodations. If you will excuse me for a moment.'

As Mrs Angela made her way toward the lavatory on the other side of the diner, I noticed that there were already a few others lined up outside the single door labelled REST ROOM. I glanced around at those still seated at the few tables or upon the stools along the counter of the diner, and there seemed to be a number of persons who were holding their hands upon their stomachs, some of them tenderly massaging their abdominal region. I, too, was beginning to feel some intestinal discomfort which might have been attributable to the poor quality of the coffee and donuts we had been served by our waitress, who now appeared to be nowhere in sight. The man sitting on my left had also excused himself and made his way across the diner. Just as I was about to get up from the table and join him and the others who were lining up outside the rest room, the man seated on my right began telling me about his 'researches' and his 'speculations' which formed the basis for his unpublished philosophical treatise An Investigation into the Conspiracy against the Human Race and how these related to his 'intense suspicions' concerning Grossvogel.

‘I should have known better than to have entered into this… excursion,’ the man said. ‘But I felt I needed to know more about what was behind Grossvogel's story. I was intensely suspicious with respect to his assertions and claims about his metamorphic recovery and about so many other things. For instance, his assertion—his realization, as he calls it—that the mind and the imagination, the soul and the self, are all simply nonsense and dreams. And yet he contends that what he calls the shadow, the darkness—the Tsalal, as his artworks are entitled—is not nonsense and dreams, and that it uses our bodies, as he claims, for what it needs to thrive upon. Well, really, what is his basis for dismissing his mind and imagination and so forth, but embracing the reality of his Tsalal, which seems no less the product of some nonsensical dream?’

I found the man's suspicious interrogations to be a welcome distraction from the intestinal pressure now building up inside me. In response to his question I said that I could only reiterate Grossvogel's explanation that he was no longer experiencing things, that is, no longer seeing things with his supposedly illusory mind and self, but with his body, which as he further contended was activated, and entirely occupied, by the shadow that is the Tsalal. ‘This isn't by any means the most preposterous revelation of its kind, at least in my experience,’ I said in defense of Grossvogel.

‘Nor is it in mine,’ he said.

‘Besides,’ I continued, ‘Grossvogel's curiously named sculptures, in my opinion, have a merit and interest apart from a strictly metaphysical context and foundation.’

‘Do you know the significance of this word—Tsalal—that he uses as the sole title for all his artworks?’

‘No, I'm afraid I have no notion of its origin or meaning,’ I regretfully confessed. ‘But I suppose you will enlighten me.’

‘Enlightenment has nothing to do with this word, which is ancient Hebrew. It means “to become darkened… to become enshadowed,” so to speak. This term has emerged not infrequently in the course of my researches for my treatise *An Investigation into the Conspiracy against the Human Race*. It occurs, of course, in numerous passages throughout the Old Testament—that potboiler of apocalypses both major and minor.’

‘Maybe so,’ I said. ‘But I don't agree that Grossvogel's use of a term from Hebrew mythology necessarily calls into question the sincerity of his assertions, or even their validity, if you want to take it that far.’

‘Yes, well, I seem not to be making myself clear to you. What I'm referring to emerged quite early in my researches and preliminary speculations for my Investigation. Briefly, I would simply say that it's not my intention to cast doubt on Grossvogel's Tsalal. My Investigation would prove me to be quite explicit and unequivocal on this phenomenon, although I would never employ the rather showy, and somewhat trivial approach that Grossvogel has taken, which to some extent could account for the fabulous success of his sculptures and pamphlets, on the one hand, and, on the other, the abysmal failure of my treatise, which will remain forever unpublished and unread. All that aside, my point is not that this Tsalal of Grossvogel's isn't in some way an actual phenomenon. I know only too well that the mind and the imagination, the soul and the self are not only the nonsensical dreams that Grossvogel makes them out to be. They

are in fact no more than a cover-up—as false and unreal as the artwork Grossvogel was producing before his medical ordeal and recovery. Grossvogel was able to penetrate this fact by some extremely rare circumstance which no doubt had something to do with his medical ordeal.'

'His gastrointestinal disorder,' I said, feeling more and more the symptoms of this malady in my own body.

'Exactly. It's the precise mechanics of this experience of his that interested me enough to invest in his excursion. This is what remains so obscure. There is nothing obvious, if I may say, about his Tsalal or its mechanism, yet Grossvogel is making what to my mind are some fascinating claims and distinctions with such overwhelming certitude. But he is certainly mistaken, or possibly being devious, on one point at least. I say this because I know that he has not been entirely forthcoming about the hospital where he was treated. In the research pertaining to my Investigation I have looked into such places and how they operate. I know for a fact that the hospital where Grossvogel was treated is an extremely rotten institution, an absolutely rotten institution. Everything about it is a sham and a cover-up for the most gruesome goings-on, the true extent of which I'm not sure even those involved with such places realize. It's not a matter of any sort of depravity, so to speak, or of malign intent. There simply develops a sort of… collusion, a rotten alliance on the part of certain people and places. They are in league with… well, if only you could read my Investigation you would know the sort of nightmare that Grossvogel was faced with in that hospital, a place reeking of nightmares. Only in such a place could Grossvogel have confronted those nightmarish realizations he has discoursed upon in his countless

pamphlets and portrayed in his series of Tsalal sculptures, which he says were not the product of his mind or imagination, or his soul or his self, but only the product of what he was seeing with his body and its organs of physical sensation —the shadow, the darkness. The mind and all that, the self and all that, are only a cover-up, only a fabrication, as Grossvogel says. They are that which cannot be seen with the body, which cannot be sensed by any organ of physical sensation. This is because they are actually non-existent cover-ups, masks, disguises for the thing that is activating our bodies in the way Grossvogel explained—activating them and using them for what it needs to thrive upon. They are the work, the artworks in fact, of the Tsalal itself. Oh, it's impossible to simply tell you. I wish you could read my Investigation. It would have explained everything, it would have revealed everything. But how could you read what was never written in the first place?'

'Never written?' I inquired. 'Why was it never written?'

'Why?' he said, pausing for a moment and grimacing in pain. 'The answer to that is exactly what Grossvogel has been preaching in both his pamphlets and his public appearances. His entire doctrine, if it can even be called that, if there could ever be such a thing in any sense whatever, is based on the non-existence, the imaginary nature of everything we believe ourselves to be. Despite his efforts to express what has happened to him, he must know very well that there are no words that are able to explain such a thing. Words are a total obfuscation of the most basic fact of existence, the very conspiracy against the human race that my treatise might have illuminated. Grossvogel has experienced the essence of this conspiracy first-hand, or at least has

claimed to have experienced it. Words are simply a cover-up for this conspiracy. They are the ultimate means for the cover-up, the ultimate artwork of the shadow, the darkness —its ultimate artistic cover-up. Because of the existence of words, we think that there exists a mind, that some kind of soul or self exists. This is just another of the infinite layers of the cover-up. There is no mind that could have written An Investigation into the Conspiracy against the Human Race— no mind that could write such a book and no mind that could read such a book. There is no one at all who can say anything about this most basic fact of existence, no one who can betray this reality. And there is no one to whom it could ever be conveyed.'

'That all seems impossible to comprehend,' I objected.

'It just might be, if only there actually were anything to comprehend, or anyone to comprehend it. But there are no such beings.'

'If that's the case,' I said, wincing with abdominal discomfort, 'then who is having this conversation?'

'Who indeed?' he answered. 'Nevertheless, I would like to continue speaking. Even if this is only nonsense and dreams, I feel the need to perpetuate it all. Especially at this moment, when this pain is taking over my mind and my self. Pretty soon none of this will make any difference. No,' he said in a dead voice. 'It doesn't matter now.'

I noticed that he had been staring out the front window of the diner for some time, gazing at the town. Some of the others in the diner were doing the same, dumbstruck at what they saw and agonized, as I was, by the means by which they were seeing it. The vacant scene of the town's empty streets and the desolate season that had presided over

the surrounding landscape, that place we had complained was absent of any manifestations of interest when we first arrived there, was undergoing a visible metamorphosis to the eyes of many of us, as though an eclipse were occurring. But what we were now seeing was not a darkness descending from far skies but a shadow which was arising from within the dead town around us, as if a torrent of black blood had begun roaring through its pale body. I realized that I had suddenly and unknowingly joined in the forefront of those who were affected by the changes taking place, even though I literally had no idea what was happening, no knowledge that came to my mind, which had ceased to function in the way it had only moments before, leaving my body in a dumb state of agony, its organs of sensation registering the gruesome spectacle of things around me: other bodies eclipsed by the shadow swirling inside their skins, some of them still speaking as though they were persons who possessed a mind and a self, imaginary entities still complaining in human words about the pain they were only beginning to realize, crying out for remedies as they entered the 'nucleus of the abysmal,' and still seeing with their minds even up to the very moment when their minds abandoned them entirely, dissipating like a mirage, able to say only how everything appeared to their minds, how the shapes of the town outside the windows of the diner were turning all crooked and crabbed, reaching out toward them as if with claws and rising up like strange peaks and horns into the sky, no longer pale and gray but swirling with the pervasive shadow, the all-moving darkness that they could finally see so perfectly because now they were seeing with their bodies, only with their bodies pitched into a great black pain. And one voice

called out—a voice that both moaned and coughed—that there was a face outside, a 'face across the entire sky,' it said. The sky and town were now both so dark that perhaps only someone preoccupied with the photographic portraiture of the human face could have seen such a thing among that world of churning shadows outside the windows of the diner. Soon after that the words all but ceased, because bodies in true pain do not speak. The very last words I remember were those of a woman who screamed for someone to take her to a hospital. And this was a request which, in the strangest way, had been anticipated by the one who had induced us into making this 'physical-metaphysical excursion' and whose body had already mastered what our bodies were only beginning to learn—the nightmare of a body that is being used and that knows what is using it, making things be what they would not be and do what they would not do. I sensed the presence of a young woman who had worn a uniform as white as gauze. She had returned. And there were others like her who moved among us, and who knew how to minister to our pains in order to effect our metamorphic recovery. We did not need to be brought to their hospital, since the hospital and all its rottenness had been brought to us.

And as much as I would like to say everything that happened to us in the town of Crampton (whose deadness and desolation seem an illusion of paradise after having its hidden life revealed to our eyes)—as much as I would like to say how it was that we were conveyed from that region of the country, that nucleus of nowhere, and returned to our distant homes—as much as I would like to say precisely what assistance and treatments we might have received that delivered us from that place and the pain we experienced

there, I cannot say anything about it at all. Because when one is saved from such agony, the most difficult thing in the world is to question the means of salvation: the body does not know or care what takes away its pain and is incapable of questioning these things. For that is what we have become, or what we have all but become—bodies without the illusion of minds or imaginations, bodies without the distractions of souls or selves. None of us among our circle questioned this fact, although we have never spoken of it since our… recovery. Nor have we spoken of the absence of Grossvogel from our circle, which does not exist in the way it once did, that is to say, as an assemblage of artists and intellectuals. We became the recipients of what someone designated the 'legacy of Grossvogel,' which was more than a metaphorical expression, since the artist had in fact bequeathed to each of us, on the condition of his 'death or disappearance for a stipulated period of time,' a share in the considerable earnings he had amassed from the sales of his works.

But this strictly monetary inheritance was only the beginning of the success that all of us from that abolished circle of artists and intellectuals began to experience, the seed from which we began to grow out of our existence as failed minds and selves into our new lives as highly successful organisms, each in our own field of endeavor. Of course we could not have failed, even if we tried, in attaining whatever end we pursued, since everything we have experienced and created was a phenomenon of the shadow, the darkness which reached outward and reached upward from inside us to claw and poke its way to the heights of a mountainous pile of human and non-human bodies. These are all we have and all we are; these are what is used and thrived upon. I can feel

my own body being used and cultivated, the desires and impulses that are pulling it to succeed, that are tugging it toward every kind of success. There is no means by which I could ever oppose these desires and impulses, now that I exist solely as a body which seeks only its efficient perpetuation so that it may be thrived upon by what needs it. There is no possibility of my resisting what needs to thrive upon us, no possibility of betraying it in any way. Even if this little account of mine, this little chronicle seems to disclose secrets that might undermine the nightmarish order of things, it does nothing but support and promulgate that order. Nothing can resist or betray this nightmare because nothing exists that might do anything, that might be anything that could realize a success in that way. The very idea of such a thing is only nonsense and dreams.

There could never be anything written about the 'conspiracy against the human race' because the phenomenon of a conspiracy requires a multiplicity of agents, a division of sides, one of which is undermining the other in some way and the other having an existence that is able to be undermined. But there is no such multiplicity or division, no undermining or resistance or betrayal on either side. What exists is only this pulling, this tugging upon all of the bodies of this world. But these bodies have a collective existence only in a taxonomic or perhaps a topographical sense and in no way constitute a collective entity, an agency that might be the object of a conspiracy. And a collective entity called the human race cannot exist where there is only a collection of non-entities, of bodies which are themselves only provisional and will be lost one by one, the whole collection of them always approaching nonsense, always dissolving into

dreams. There can be no conspiracy in a void, or rather in a black abyss. There can only be this tugging of all these bodies toward that ultimate success which it seems my large-bodied friend realized when he was finally used to the fullest extent, and his body used up, entirely consumed by what needed it to thrive.

'There is only one true and final success for the shadow that makes things what they would not be,' Grossvogel proclaimed in the very last of his pamphlets. 'There is only one true and final success for the all-moving blackness that makes things do what they would not do,' he wrote. And these were the very last lines of that last pamphlet. Grossvogel could not explain himself or anything else beyond these inconclusive statements. He had run out of the words that (to quote someone who shall remain as nameless as only a member of the human race can be) are the ultimate artwork of the shadow, the darkness—its ultimate artistic cover-up. Just as he could not resist it as his body was pulled toward that ultimate success, he could not betray it with his words.

It was during the winter following the Crampton excursion that I began fully to see where these last words of Grossvogel were leading. Late one night I stood gazing from a window as the first snow of the season began to fall and become increasingly prolific throughout each dark hour that I observed its progress with my organs of physical sensation. By that time I could see what was inside the falling flakes of snow, just as I could see what was inside all other things, activating them with its force. And what I saw was a black snow falling from a black sky. There was nothing recognizable in that sky—certainly no familiar visage spread out across the night and implanted into it. There was only this

blackness above and this blackness below. There was only this consuming, proliferating blackness whose only true and final success was in merely perpetuating itself as successfully as it could in a world where nothing exists that could ever hope to be anything else except what it needs to thrive upon… until everything is entirely consumed and there is only one thing remaining in all existence and it is an infinite body of blackness activating itself and thriving upon itself with eternal success in the deepest abyss of entity. Grossvogel could not resist or betray it, even if it was an absolute nightmare, the ultimate physical-metaphysical nightmare. He ceased to be a person so that he could remain a successful organism. 'Anyone would do the same,' he said.

And no matter what I say I cannot resist or betray it. No one could do so because there is no one here. There is only this body, this shadow, this darkness.

I Have A Special Plan For This World (2002 My Work Is Not Yet Done Version)

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I remember working in an office where the atmosphere of tension had become so severe and pervasive that one could barely see more than a few feet in any direction. This resulted in considerable difficulties for those of us who were trying to perform the tasks which our jobs required. For instance, if for some reason we needed to leave our desks and negotiate our way to another part of the building, it was not possible to see beyond a certain distance, which was at most a few feet. Outside of this limited perimeter—this 'cocoon of clarity', as I thought of it—everything became obscured in a kind of quivering blur, an ambience of agitation within which the solid and dreary decor of the company offices appeared quite distorted.

People were constantly bumping into each other in the narrow aisleways and high-ceilinged hallways of the Blaine Company offices, so severe was this state of affairs in which the atmosphere of tension at that place had caused any object more than a few feet away to be lost in a jittering and filmy tableau. One might glimpse some indistinct shape nearby, perhaps something resembling a face, which at best would look like a rubber mask. Then suddenly you found

yourself colliding with one of your fellow office workers. At that moment the image of the other person became grotesquely clarified in contrast to the otherwise blurry environment brought on by the severe tension, the incredible agitation that existed in the office and pervaded its every corner, even into the smallest storage room and the sub-basement of the old office building in which the Blaine Company was the only tenant.

After one of those collisions between coworkers, which occurred with great frequency during this time of tension, each of the persons involved would quickly mouth some words of pardon to the other. Of course I can only be sure about my own words—they were always polite expressions of self-pardoning, no matter how I actually felt at that precise moment of collision. As for the words that were spoken by the other person, I cannot attest, because these were invariably garbled or sometimes entirely lost in that same atmosphere of tension and agitation that obtained throughout the Blaine workplace. (Even in the closest quarters all exchanges of conversation carried only a few inches at most before they turned into a senseless babble or were lost altogether.) But whatever these words might have been was irrelevant, for very soon you had collected yourself and were rushing off once again into the blurred spaces before you in the Blaine offices, trying to put out of your mind that intensely clarified image you had witnessed, if only for a flashing moment—that microscopically detailed eyeball, that pair of super-defined lips (or just a single one of those lips), a nostril bristling with tiny hairs, a mountainous knuckle. Whatever you might have seen you wanted only to drive from your mind as soon as possible. Otherwise this image of

some part of a human face or a human body would hook itself into your brain and become associated with the viciously tense and agitated state in which we all existed, thereby initiating a series of violent thoughts and fantasies concerning that eyeball or pair of lips, especially if you recognized the person to whom those parts were attached and could give a name to the object of your murderous rage.

To a certain extent the conditions I have described could be attributed to the management system under which the company was organized. It seemed evident that the various departmental supervisors, and even upper-level managers, operated according to a mandate that required them to create and maintain an environment of tension-filled conflict among the lower staff of the company. Whether this practice was dictated by some trend in managing technique or was endemic to the Blaine Company was a matter of speculation. But there was another, and more significant, reason for this climate of tense agitation under which we labored, a situation that, after all, is common to working environments everywhere. The reason to which I refer is this: the city in which the Blaine Company offices were located—in fact had very recently *re*-located—had once been known, quite justly, as 'Murder Town'. Hence, it was not unreasonable to conclude that the atmosphere of tension, of agitation, that, at certain times, severely affected the spaces of the building in which the Blaine Company was the only tenant, had its counterpart in the streets of the city outside the building.

More often than not, this city which had once been known as Murder Town was permeated by a yellowish haze. This particular haze was usually so dense that the streetlights of the downtown section as well as the vast, decaying

neighborhoods surrounding this area were in operation both day and night. Furthermore, there existed a direct correlation between the murders that took place in the city and the density of the yellowish haze which veiled its streets. Even though no one openly recognized this correspondence, it was a verifiable fact: the heavier this yellowish haze weighed upon the city, the more murders would need to be reported by the local news sources. It was as simple as that.

The actual number of murders could most accurately be traced only in a tabloid newspaper called the *Metro Herald*, which thrived on sensational stories and statistics. The other newspapers, those which purveyed a more dignified image of themselves, proved to be a far less reliable record of both the details of the murders that were occurring throughout the city and also the actual number of these murders. These latter newspapers also failed to indicate any link between the density of the yellowish haze and the city's murder count. True enough, neither did the *Metro Herald* draw direction attention to this link—it was simply a reality that was easier to follow in their pages than in those newspapers with a more dignified image, let alone the radio and television sources, which labored under the burden of delivering their information, respectively, by means of either a human voice or by a human head accompanied by a human voice, lending both of these media a greater immediacy and reality than their printed counterparts. The consequence of the heightened reality of the radio and television news sources was that they could not afford to report anything close to the true quantity or the full details of murders that were always happening. Because if they did offer such reports by means of a human voice, with or without the pres-

ence of a human head, they would make themselves intolerable to their listeners and viewers, and ultimately they would lose advertising revenue because their audiences would abandon them, leaving only these human voices and heads reporting one murder after another without anyone listening to them or watching them recite these crimes... whereas the newspapers with a dignified image were able to relegate a modicum of such murder stories to the depths of their ample pages, allowing their readers to take or leave these accounts as they wished, while the *Metro Herald* actually thrived upon disseminating such sensational news to a readership eager to consume dispatches on the bleakest, most bizarre, and most scandalous business of the world. Yet even the *Metro Herald* was forced to draw the line at some point when it came to making known to their readers the full quantity as well as the true nature of all of the murderous goings-on in the city to which the Blaine Company had relocated—the city that was once known as Murder Town.

Of course by the time of the company's relocation the epithet of Murder Town was no longer in wide usage, having been eradicated by a sophisticated public relations campaign specifically designed to attract commercial entities like the Blaine Company. Thus, the place formerly known as Murder Town had now acquired an informal civic designation as the Golden City. As anyone might have observed, no specific rationale was ever advanced to justify the city's new persona—the quality of being ‘golden’ was merely put forth as a given trait, a new identity which was bolstered in the most shameless manner in radio, television, and newspaper ads, not to mention billboards and brochures. It was something assumed to be so, as though ‘goldenness’– with all the associ-

ations attending this term—had always been a vital element of the city. Certainly there was never any reference made, as one might have assumed, to the meteorological phenomenon of the yellowish haze that was truly the preeminent distinction of the physical landscape of the city, including the vast and decaying neighborhoods that surrounded it. In radio, television, and newspaper ads, across billboards, and in the glossy pages of brochures that were mailed out on a worldwide scale, the city was always depicted as a place with clear skies above and tidy metropolitan avenues below. This image, of course, could not have been more at odds with the city's crumbling and all-but-abandoned towers, beneath which were streets so choked with a yellowish haze that one was fortunate to be able to see more than a few yards in any direction.

I knew for a fact that a deal had been struck between the local bureaus of commerce and businesses like the Blaine Company, which could not, for the sake of appearances, relocate their offices to a place whose second name was Murder Town but could easily settle themselves in the Golden City. Nevertheless, it was this place—this haze-choked Murder Town—to which the Blaine Company had been attracted and which well suited, as I well knew, its purposes as a commercial entity.

Not long after the Blaine Company had relocated itself, a memorandum went out to all employees from the office of the founder and president of the company, U G Blaine, a person whom none of us, with the exception of some members of senior management, had ever seen and from whom we had never received a direct communication of any kind, at least not since I had been hired to work in its offices. The

memo was brief and simply announced that a 'company-wide restructuring' was imminent, although no dates or details, and no reasoning of any kind, were offered for this dramatic action. Within a few months of the announcement of this obscure 'restructuring', the supervisors of the various departments within the Blaine Company, as well as a few members of upper-level management, were all murdered.

Perhaps I might be allowed a moment to elaborate on the murders I have just mentioned, which were indeed unusual even for a city that had once been known as Murder Town. The most crucial datum which I should impart is that every one of the murders of persons holding management positions at the Blaine Company had taken place within the Golden City on days when the yellowish haze had been especially dense. This fact could have been corroborated by anyone who had taken the least interest in the matter, even if none of the local newspapers (never mind the radio and television reports) ever indicated this connection. Nonetheless, it was quite conspicuous, if one only took the time to glance out the window on certain days when the streets outside were particularly hazy or particularly yellowish, what was in the works. Sometimes I would peek over the enclosure that surrounded my desk and look out into the streets thick with haze. On those occasions I would think to myself, 'Another one of them will be murdered today.' And without exception this would be the case: before the day was out, or sometime during the night, the body of another supervisor, and sometimes a member of upper-level management, would be found lying dead somewhere in the Golden City.

Most often the murders took place as the victims were walking from their cars on their way into work or walking

back to their cars after the workday was over, while some of the crimes transpired when the victims were actually inside their cars. Less frequently was the body of a supervisor, or someone of even higher rank within the company, found dead in the evening hours or on weekends. The reason that far fewer of these murders occurred during the evening and on weekends was blatant, even if no one ever made an issue of it. As I have already pointed out, these murders always took place in the Golden City, and even needed to take place there. However, very few of the supervisors, and certainly none of the members of upper-level management, resided within the city limits for the simple reason that they could afford to live in one of the outlying suburbs, where the yellowish haze was seldom as dense and quite often not even visible, or at least not visible to the unaided or unobservant eye. Consequently the victims had scant motivation to make an appearance in the Golden City after working hours or on weekends, for there was nothing, or very little, to attract anyone to this place—and many things that gave cause to avoid it—other than that this happened to be the location where one was forced to come to work. Yet these persons, who spent as little time as possible in the Golden City, were exclusively the ones, out of the large roster of those employed by the Blaine Company, to be viciously murdered there. Or so it was in the beginning.

On some days more than one supervisor's body would be discovered exhibiting the signs of the most violent physical attack, which often suggested the work of more than one assailant, although the crime scene otherwise suggested no evidence of a premeditated conspiracy or thoughtful planning. They all seemed, in fact, to be makeshift affairs. Some-

times they were crude assaults with whatever objects might have been close at hand (such as a fragment of crumbling sidewalk or a piece of broken window in a back alley). Often the cause of death was simply strangulation or even suffocation in which lice-ridden rags had been jammed deep into the victim's throat. Quite often it was just a beating unto death that left indications of more than one pair of pummeling fists and more than one kind of savagely kicking shoe. Frequently the corpses of these unfortunate supervisors, and the occasional member of upper-level management, were stripped of their clothing, as well as robbed of their money and other valuable effects. This was typical of so many of the murders in the Golden City, a fact that could be verified by the many detectives who interviewed almost everyone at the Blaine Company in the course of their investigations of these crimes, which, in the absence of any other peculiar facts of evidence, were attributed to the numerous derelicts who made their home in the city's streets.

There was, of course, the salient fact—which did not escape the investigating detectives but which, for some reason, they never saw as a relevant issue—that for quite some time all of the victims who worked at the Blaine Company offices had attained the level of supervisor, if not an even higher position in the company. I doubt that the detectives were even aware that it was in the nature of a supervisor's function at the company to foment exactly the kind of violent and even murderous sentiments that would lead low-level staff to form images in their minds of doing away with these people, however we tried to cast such imagined scenes from our minds as soon as they began to form. And now that all of these supervisors had been murdered, we only had each

other upon whom to exercise our violent thoughts and fantasies. This situation was aggravated by the tension that derived from our concern over the likely installation of an entirely new group of supervisors throughout the company.

As most of the lower staff employees realized, it was possible to become accustomed to the violent thoughts and fantasies inspired by a supervisor of long standing, and for precisely this reason these supervisors would often be replaced in their position because they were no longer capable of inspiring fresh images of violence in the minds of those they were charged with supervising. With the arrival of a newly appointed supervisor there was inevitably a revival of just the sort of tension that developed into an office atmosphere in which you could barely see a few feet in any direction whenever you were required to move about the aisleways and hallways of the building to which the company had relocated not long before these events which I have chosen to document transpired. It was therefore welcome news to employees when it was made known, by means of a brief memo from one of the highest members of senior management, that none of the murdered supervisors would be replaced and that this position was to be permanently eliminated as part of the scheme for restructuring the company.

The relief experienced among the lower staff of the various departments and divisions of the Blaine Company that they would not have to face the prospect of newly appointed supervisors—or supervisors of any kind, since they had all been murdered—allowed the tension which had been so severe and pervasive to abate, thereby clearing the air around the offices from its previous condition of a blurry atmosphere of agitation and also clearing our minds of the vi-

olent thoughts and fantasies that we had come to direct so viciously at one another. However, this state of relative well-being was only temporary and was soon replaced by symptoms of acute apprehension and anxiety. This reversal occurred following a company-wide meeting held in the sub-basement of the building where the Blaine offices had been relocated.

While the senior officers who called for this meeting readily admitted that a sub-basement in an old and crumbling office building was perhaps not the ideal place to hold a company-wide meeting, it was nevertheless the only space large enough to accommodate the company's full staff of employees and was thought preferable to convening at a site elsewhere in the Golden City, since we would then be required to travel through the yellowish haze which lately had become far more consistently dense owing to ‘seasonal factors’, according to the radio and television reports of local meteorologists. Thus we all came to be huddled in the dim and dirty realm of the building's sub-basement, where we were required to stand for lack of adequate seating and where the senior officers of the company addressed us from a crude platform constructed of thin wooden planks which creaked and moaned throughout this session of speeches and announcements, their words sounding throughout that sub-basement space as hollow and dreamlike echoes.

What we were told, in essence, was that the Blaine Company was positioning itself to become a ‘dominant presence in the world marketplace’, in the rather vague words of an executive vice president. This declaration struck nearly everyone who stood crushed together in that sub-basement as a preposterous ambition, given that the company

provided no major products or services to speak of, its principal commercial activity consisting almost wholly of what I would describe as *manipulating documents* of one sort or another, none of which had any great import or interest beyond a narrow and financially marginal base of customers, including such clients as a regional chain of dry cleaners, several far-flung restaurants that served inexpensive or at most moderately priced fare, some second-rate facilities featuring dog races that were in operation only part of a given year, and a few private individuals whose personal affairs were such that they required—or perhaps only persuaded themselves out of vanity that they required—the type of document manipulation in which the Blaine Company almost exclusively specialized. However, it was soon revealed to us that the company had plans to become active in areas far beyond, and quite different from, its former specialization in manipulating documents. This announcement was delivered by an elderly man who was introduced to us as Henry Winston, the new Vice President of Development. Mr Winston spoke in a somewhat robotic tone as he recited to us the radical transformations the company would need to undergo in order to make, or remake, itself into a dominant force in the world marketplace, although he never disclosed the full nature that these transformations, or 'restructurings', as they were called, would take. Nor did Mr Winston specify the new areas of commercial activity in which the company would be engaged in the very near future.

During the course of Mr Winston's address, none of us could help noticing that he seemed terribly out of place among the other members of senior management who occupied that rickety wooden platform constructed especially for

this meeting. His suit appeared to have been tailored for a larger body than the bony frame that now shifted beneath the high-priced materials which hung upon the old man. And his thick white hair was heavily greased and slicked back, yet as he spoke it began to sprout up in places, as if his lengthy, and in some places yellowed locks were not accustomed to the grooming now forced upon them.

As murmurs began to arise among those of us pressed together in that dim and dirty sub-basement, Mr Winston's mechanical monologue was cut short by one of the other senior officers, who took the spotlight from the old man and proceeded to deliver the final announcement of the meeting. Yet even before this final announcement was made by a severe-looking woman with close-cropped hair, many of those among the crowd huddled into the confines of that sub-basement had already guessed or intuited its message. From the moment we descended into that lowest level of the building by way of the freight elevator, there was a feeling expressed by several employees that an indefinable presence inhabited that place, something that was observing us very closely without ever presenting a lucid image of itself. Several people from the lower staff even claimed to have glimpsed a peculiar figure in the dark reaches of the sub-basement, a shape of some kind that seemed to maneuver about the edges of the congregation, a hazy human outline that drifted as slowly and silently as the yellowish haze in the streets of the Golden City and was seen to be of a similar hue.

So by the time the woman with the close-cropped hair made what might otherwise have been a striking revelation, most of the lower staff were beyond the point of receiving

the news as any great surprise. ‘Therefore,’ continued the severe-looking woman, ‘the role of those supervisors who have been so tragically lost to our organization will now be taken over by none other than the founder and president of the Blaine Company—Mr U G Blaine. In an effort to facilitate the restructuring of our activities as a business, Mr Blaine will henceforth be taking a *direct hand* in every aspect of the company's day-to-day functions. Unfortunately, Mr Blaine could not be present today, but he extends his assurance that he looks forward to working with each and every one of you in the near future. So, if there are no questions’—and there were none –‘this meeting is therefore concluded.’ And as we ascended in the freight elevator to return to our desks, nothing at all was said about the plans revealed to us for the company's future.

Later that day, however, I heard the voices of some of my coworkers in conversation nearby the enclosure that surrounded my desk. ‘It's perfectly insane what they're doing,’ whispered a woman whose voice I recognized as that of a longtime employee and a highly productive manipulator of documents. Others in this group more or less agreed with this woman's evaluation of the company's grandiose ambition of becoming a dominant force in the world marketplace. Finally someone said, ‘I'm thinking of giving my notice. For some time now I've been regretting that I ever followed the company to this filthy city.’ The person who spoke these words was someone known around the office as The Bow Tie Man, a name granted to him due to his penchant for sporting this eponymous item of apparel on a daily basis. He seemed to enjoy the distinction he gained by wearing a wide variety of bow ties rather than ordinary straight ties, or even

no tie at all. Although there were possibly millions of men around the world who also wore bow ties as a signature of sartorial distinction, he was the only one in the Blaine Company offices to do so. This practice of his allowed him to express a mode of personal identity, however trivial and illusory, as if such a thing could be achieved merely by adorning oneself with a particular item of apparel or even by displaying particular character traits such as a reserved manner or a high degree of intelligence, all and any of which qualities were shared by millions and millions of persons past and present and would continue to be exhibited by millions and millions of persons in the future, making the effort to perpetrate a distinctive sense of an identity apart from other persons or creatures, or even inanimate objects, no more than a ludicrous charade.

It was after I heard The Bow Tie Man proclaim that he was of a mind to 'give his notice' that I stepped away from my desk and walked over to join the conversation being carried on by some of my coworkers. 'And after you give your notice,' I asked The Bow Tie Man, 'then what? Where will you go? What other place could you find that would be any different?' Then the woman whose voice I had previously recognized as that of a longtime member of the company's staff spoke up, protesting that it was absolutely deranged for the company to imagine that it could ever become a dominant force in the world marketplace. 'Do you really think so?' I replied. 'Haven't you observed that there is a natural tendency, deranged or not, for all such entities as the Blaine Company, for any kind of business or government or even private individual, to extend themselves as far as possible—to force themselves on the world as much as they can, either

by becoming a dominant commercial entity or merely by wearing bow ties every day, thereby imposing themselves on the persons and things around them, imposing what they are or what they believe themselves to be without regard or respect for anything else aside from how far they can reach out into the world and put their seal upon it, even stretching out into other worlds, shouting commands at the stars themselves and claiming the universe as their own?'

By that point, I think my coworkers were taken aback, not as much by the words I had spoken as by the fact that I had spoken to them at all, something I had never done apart from the verbal exchanges required by our work as document manipulators. From their expressions I could see that my speaking to them in this way was somehow monstrous and wrong—a freak happening whose occurrence signified something they did not wish to name. Almost immediately afterward the group broke up, and we all returned to our desks.

That afternoon the yellowish haze of the Golden City was especially dense and pushed itself heavily against the windows of the building where the Blaine Company had relocated itself. And on the very same day that upper-level management had announced to us that none of the murdered supervisors would be replaced and that U G Blaine himself was going to take a direct hand in the day-to-day operations of each department and division within the company, it seemed that his supervisory presence was already among us.

The most conspicuous early sign of what I will call the 'Blaine presence' was the distinct yellowish tint which now permeated the company's office space. Less obvious was the sense, which a number of persons had previously experi-

enced during the company-wide meeting, that we were at all times under the eye of something we could not see but which was intimately aware of our every word and action. Before the day was over, everyone in the office seemed to have gained a silent understanding of why we had relocated to the Golden City and why this place, which had once been known as Murder Town, was so well suited to the purposes of commercial entities like the Blaine Company… or was at least perceived to be so by the heads of such corporate bodies.

By the following business day there was no longer any talk around the office about the deranged strategy of the company to become a dominant force in the world marketplace. And no one commented on the absence of the man who wore bow ties each and every day. Perhaps the others actually believed that he had given his notice—a course of action he had suggested he might take—even though none of his personal items had been removed from his desk. Since the supervisor of our department had been murdered like all the others, there was no one whose duty it was to be concerned with the failure of The Bow Tie Man to show up at the office, just as there was no one who proffered any information about the meaning of his absence. After a few days had passed, his desk was occupied by a new employee, a man whom no one had ever seen working elsewhere in the company and who did not seem like the sort of person any company would hire to manipulate documents. His age was difficult to discern because his face was almost entirely obscured by shaggy strands of unwashed hair and an ample growth of untended beard, both of which were streaked with the discoloration which we noticed affected anything that was subject to longtime exposure to the peculiar atmo-

spheric elements of the Golden City. As for the clothes worn by our new coworker, they appeared to be very much in the same style as his predecessor who formerly inhabited that particular desk. However, due to the length of the new employee's beard, it was not possible to verify whether or not he was wearing a bow tie each and every day. And no one in the office desired to look close enough to find out if this was the case. Nevertheless, there was one woman whom I overheard telling another that she was going to check on The Bow Tie Man in order to establish what had become of him. Then she herself failed to show up for work the next day. Afterward no one else pursued the disappearance of either of these two employees, nor that of any of several other employees who on a fairly regular basis now began to drop out of the ranks of the lower staff at the Blaine Company, which by this time was known to the world simply as 'Blaine'.

Needless to say, the degree of tension that now pervaded the offices at Blaine was once again at an extremely high level. Yet this tense environment, which had always served as a hothouse for the most violent thoughts and fantasies among company personnel, no longer had an effect on the atmosphere of our workplace, such that you could not see more than a few feet in front of your face. Instead, the office space continued to be evenly permeated by a yellowish tint. While I have already identified this distinct yellowish coloration of the office atmosphere with what I have called the Blaine presence, others around me—and throughout the company—held the view that the haze which choked the streets of the Golden City had somehow seeped into the building where we spent each day manipulating documents. But it seemed to me that these differing explanations were in

fact complementary. In my view there was a terrible equation between the Blaine presence, which now supervised every activity throughout the company, even the smallest manipulations of the most insignificant documents, and the yellowish haze casting itself so densely over the Golden City —a place that seemed so well suited to the purposes of commercial entities like Blaine, which of course were merely extensions of the purposes of human entities like U G Blaine himself, specifically his seemingly preposterous ambition to turn his business into a dominant force in the world marketplace. All of this remained hypothetical for some time... until one day a certain turn of events allowed me to confirm my suspicions and at the same time—after so much patient restraint—enabled me to pursue my own purposes with respect to the relocation of the company.

This turning point came in the form of a summons to the office of the new Vice President of Development, Mr Henry Winston, who was located in a remote part of the building in which Blaine was the only tenant. Mr Winston's office, I noted when I first entered, was a sty. Judging by the stained mattress in a corner behind some rusted filing cabinets and the remnants of food and beverage containers scattered about the floor, Mr Winston had transformed the place into his personal hovel. The Vice President of Development himself was seated behind an old and heavily scarred wooden desk, his arms stretched across the desktop and his head lying sideways upon it in noisy slumber. When I closed the door behind me, Mr Winston slowly awakened and looked up at me, his hair and beard no longer groomed in the way they had been for the sub-basement meeting at which he spoke some months before. And what he had to say to me

now still sounded as though he were reading from a script, although the quality of his voice was far less robotic than it had been at the company-wide meeting.

Mr Winston rubbed his eyes and ran his tongue around the inside of his mouth, catching the aftertaste of the sleep I had disturbed. Then, as if he were a busy man, he got right to the point. ‘He wants to have a conference with you. There's a…’ Mr Winston paused a moment, apparently at a loss to recall or properly enunciate his next words. ‘A proposal. There's a proposal he has for you… a personal proposal.’

Mr Winston then informed me of the time and place for this conference with U G Blaine—after the end of that working day, in a lavatory on one of the uppermost floors of the building. This seemed to be everything that the Vice President of Development was required to communicate to me, and I turned to leave his office. But before I was out the door he blurted out a few words that genuinely seemed to be his own.

‘He should never have brought you here,’ said Mr Winston, which very well might have been his real name.

‘You mean the relocation of the company to this city,’ I replied, attempting to clarify the issue.

‘That's right. The re-lo-cation,’ he said, breaking into a little laugh and revealing an incomplete set of yellow teeth. But he stopped laughing when I looked over my shoulder back at him, focusing my eyes deep into his.

‘Mr Blaine isn't entirely responsible,’ I said. ‘We both know how it is with this city.’

After a brief pause Mr Winston spoke. ‘I know you now,’ he said as if speaking softly in a dream. ‘You were here be-

fore… when the sky was clear. What did you do?'

I simply smiled at the Vice President of Development and then exited that squalid office, leaving the man inside with his sleep-polluted mouth hanging open in stupefied wonder.

By this juncture in the company's progress, there were no longer many employees remaining who were not of a kind with Henry Winston. One by one all the regular staff stopped appearing for work, and their desks came to be occupied by new persons who always looked like fugitives from the great tribe of derelicts living in the Golden City, a shadow population that moved day and night through that yellowish haze. No doubt they too had made accommodations for themselves in the building, little havens similar to the one I saw in Henry Winston's office. I imagined that such accommodations and a modicum of food may have been offered to them by the company in lieu of a paycheck. This scheme for 'cost-cutting' would alone account for the elevated profits that Blaine had realized in the past quarter. Of course this manner of fiscal growth could not continue much longer, and other measures would need to be taken if the company was truly to become a dominant force in the marketplace of this world or any other. These measures, I assumed, would emerge as the chief topic of the conference U G Blaine had scheduled with me after the close of the working day in a lavatory on one of the uppermost floors of that crumbling building.

When the time came, I began ascending the shaft of stairways—the elevator having ceased to function by that time—in anticipation of my private meeting with the company's president and founder. As I made my way in nearly total darkness up these steps I recalled the day that I came to in-

terview for my position with what was then called the Blaine Company. That interview took place in another building in another city. In the reception area where I waited to be called for my interview there hung a portrait of U G Blaine. It was a flattering-enough likeness of a middle-aged man in a business suit, but the effect of contemplating this portrait was such that I wanted to turn away and purge it from my mind before I started thinking thoughts that I did not want in my head. But I found it impossible to turn away. Fortunately someone came along and called me to my interview before my thoughts reached a pitch of intolerable tension and agitation.

The person who interviewed me asked, among other things, what single personal quality I believed I might possess that would distinguish me for consideration as an employee of the Blaine Company. I hesitated for some time, and even thought it might be best if I gave no reply at all, or a very feeble and conventional response. Instead I spoke some words that I was sure the interviewer wanted to hear and that, in fact, were true. 'My quality,' I said, 'my personal quality is the capacity to drive myself and those around me to the uttermost limits of our potential—to affect persons, and even places, in a way that brings their unsuspected possibilities and purposes out of hiding and into the full light of realization. That is my personal quality.'

As oddly phrased and vehement as this statement might sound to other individuals, it was, I knew, exactly what my interviewer wanted to hear. On the spot I was offered the position for which I had applied at the Blaine Company—that of a manipulator of documents. When I entered the company's old offices to be interviewed my only purpose was to

lose myself in the manipulation of documents, to bury as deeply as I could this passionate personal quality of mine, which had always resulted in the most unfortunate and twisted consequences for those involved, whether it was an individual person or a group of persons or a commercial entity like the Blaine Company. Because my personal quality, as stated to my interviewer at the Blaine Company, was more than a figure of speech or an exaggerated claim for the purposes of self-promotion, even if I have been at a lifelong loss to account for the full force of this extraordinary quality. For years my only purpose had been to suppress this quality, to crush it as best I could. However, after contemplating that portrait of U G Blaine—after seeing written upon that face what I might describe as a 'profoundly baseless sense of purpose in the world'– everything changed inside my head, which I could no longer keep from filling up with strange and violent thoughts and fantasies. 'This company will soon need to relocate,' I thought as I walked away from my interview that day. 'In order to satisfy its sense of purpose as a commercial entity, and the baseless sense of purpose of its founder and president, this company will need to relocate to another place.' And I knew precisely the place that was well suited to the company's purposes… and to my own. Thus, when I finally located and entered the small lavatory where U G Blaine wished to confer with me, I was incited to the point of derangement by the grim drama which was now coming to a climax.

'Opportunity awaits you in the Golden City,' I shouted, my voice resounding against the tile walls and floor, the metal doors and porcelain fixtures of the antiquated lavatory surrounding me. 'Opportunity awaits you in the Golden

City,' I repeated, mocking the slogan that a public relations company had used to transform the image of the city once known as Murder Town. It was this preposterous dream of changing its public image that made the Golden City ideal for the purposes of Blaine (the company), which held the deranged and preposterous idea that it could ever become a dominant force in the world marketplace, even though its only commercial activity was that of manipulating documents for small-time businesses and a few private individuals. Only in this atmosphere of a crumbling city surrounded by vast, decaying neighborhoods, its streets filled with hordes of wandering derelicts and permeated by a yellowish haze that no meteorologist or scientist of any kind had ever successfully accounted for… only in this Murder Town could I manage to drive Mr U G Blaine to the uttermost limit of his potential—just as I had driven this city itself, whose streets I inhabited for a time, to the vile and devious limit of its potential, leaving behind an inexplicable yellowish haze, a mere side effect of the things that I had done there, things that I was born to do as a freak of this world (or perhaps another world altogether, so unknown am I to myself), things that my freakish nature learned to do over many years, and things that made me seek my own burial in an occupation where I could forget my freakish self and everything I knew about this world where I did not belong. Only here could Blaine be made to realize his unsuspected possibilities and purposes, especially that baseless sense of purpose which I could not escape seeing in that portrait of a middle-aged man in a business suit.

Of course it was not a man in a business suit who awaited my arrival in that small lavatory—it was the Blaine presence,

as I called it, that pervaded the bright little room with its yellow tint. ‘Your restructuring of the company has been a great success,’ I said to the Blaine presence, which now quivered and curled about the room in trembling, yellow-tinted waves. ‘Soon it will be just you and your derelicts in this building. You will be the dominant force in the marketplace of the Golden City, manipulating all the documents in town. But you will never go further than that. This is where you belong. This is where you will stay. And there's nothing either of us can do to change that. You think that I can assist you in extending your power and influence, your marketplace dominance, but I came to tell you that no such thing will ever happen. This place is your uttermost limit.’

The Blaine presence was now becoming extremely agitated, its yellow tint swirling about the room and batting itself against the walls. ‘There's no use in blaming me for what you are,’ I screamed. ‘You're the creator of a marketplace for violent thoughts and fantasies. I saw that in the portrait of the middle-aged man in a business suit, and I can feel it in the presence you have now made of yourself. That's all there can ever be for you in this world.’

At that point I picked up a wastepaper container that stood by the lavatory sink and was shaped like a bullet with a rounded point. Across the room was a small window with panes of frosted glass. I smashed those glass panes by ramming the rounded top of the wastepaper container into it with all the violent force within me. Through the smashed panes of that window in a lavatory on one of the uppermost floors of the building you could see out over the city, the moon shining down through the yellowish haze. ‘There,’ I shouted while pointing out the broken window. ‘Go out into

your world of haze. That's your element now. And you can't survive beyond its limits. The limits of the Golden City.'

I felt a powerful, almost cyclonic gust sweep past me on all sides, even moving through me as it soared out the broken window and blended into the yellowish haze beyond, leaving behind it a room charged with the residue of vicious and violent impulses.

After that night, the Golden City was rechristened as Murder Town. Early the next morning, the streetlights still shining through the yellowish haze, brutally mauled bodies were discovered lying in every street of the city and far into the vast, decaying neighborhoods surrounding it. For a time news reports broadcasted by radio and television and printed in newspapers with a dignified image as well as tabloid rags like the *Metro Herald*—where I once worked as a reporter myself—were concerned with nothing but these murders, which they called 'Murders of Mystery' or 'Mysterious Mass Murders'.

However, it was not long before serious consideration was given to the possibility that these were not murders at all but the consequences of what the *Metro Herald* designated the 'Yellow Plague', because the bodies of the victims all displayed jaundiced blotches that overworked hospital personnel, police investigators, and morgue attendants had at first assumed to be bruises caused by violent attacks. For a day or so city officials had the opportunity to present the cause of these astonishingly lurid and numerous deaths as, quite possibly, an instance of a mysterious disease rather than of mysterious murder. With the cooperation of local law enforcement and medical officials, along with the services of a sophisticated public relations campaign, the issue of how such an

incredible number of corpses might have been produced during a single night could have been confused long enough for the city to waver between its old reputation as a place of murder and an entirely new identity as a place of disease. Of course, given the alternative of henceforth being known to the world as the 'City of the Yellow Plague', on the one hand, or as 'Murder Town', on the other, the latter appellative seemed the preferable choice.

Apparently unrelated to the Mystery Murders, according to news reports disseminated by all the local media, was the discovery of the body of a middle-aged man dressed in a worn business suit in a suburb just outside the city limits. Eventually identified as U G Blaine, the corpse was found lying in the parking lot of a small outdoor shopping center. Investigators uncovered no signs that might have connected Blaine's death to those which took place the night before in Murder Town. To all appearances the man had simply collapsed and died in a place where the yellowish haze of what was once known as the Golden City dissolved altogether, giving way to the lucid atmosphere of an upper-class suburb contiguous with the city's outlying neighborhoods.

On that same morning that Blaine's body was found, I walked through the deserted streets of a city where others were still afraid to walk, strolling calmly through the stillness and the yellowish haze. For a moment I felt that I had finally driven myself to my limit, and I was content as errant pages from local newspapers flapped idiotically along the sidewalk and streetlights glared down upon me.

But before the morning had passed I was ready to move on—to relocate once more. My purpose, for a time, had exhausted itself. But now I could see there were other cities,

other people and places. I could see all the world as if it loomed only a few feet in front of me—its every aspect so clear to my eyes that I would never be able to drive it from my mind until the last of my violent thoughts and fantasies had been fulfilled. Even though I knew in the depths of myself that it was all just another preposterous ambition, a false front propped up by baseless purposes and dreams, I could not help thinking to myself –'I have a special plan for this world.'

May this document, unmanipulated, stand as my declaration of purpose.

My Work Is Not Yet Done (2002 My Work Is Not Yet Done Version)

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I had always been afraid. However, as self-serving as this may sound, I never believed this to be a cause for shame or regret, even though an intolerable suffering may ensue from such a trait. It seemed to me that the finest people, as people go, cannot help but betray a fair portion of fear and insecurity, even full-blown panic. On the other hand, someone must have a considerable dose of the swine in their make-up to get through even a single day unafflicted by trepidations of one sort or another, not to mention those who go out of their way to court dangerous encounters, fearlessly calling attention to themselves, figuratively waving their arms and declaring to everyone within range, 'Hey, look at me. I'm up here. See what I can do. I'm the one you have to knock down. I'm the one.'

Of course there is a measure of beast's blood in anyone who aspires to maintain a place in the world, anyone who lacks that ultimate decency to remove themselves from the herd either by violence to themselves or total capitulation to their dread. It's simply a matter of degree.

At the company where I had been a longtime employee, the purest breed of swine was represented by the seven persons with whom I met in a conference room according to a

weekly schedule. I had risen, somewhat reluctantly but with a definite touch of swinishness, to the position of a supervisor in my division of a company in which there were countless other divisions. This made it necessary to attend these meetings along with six others of my kind and a seventh who was our superior by virtue of his having outswined the rest of us.

During a meeting of my own staff, someone whose mind was not fixated, as was mine, on the swine analogy, referred to these persons with whom I met, according to a weekly schedule, as The Seven Dwarfs.

'So what does that make me, Dave—Snow White?'

'No, Frank,' interjected Lisa, 'that would make you Prince, uh, what's-his-name.'

'Charming,' said Lois.

'Pardon me?' replied Lisa.

'Prince Charming. Didn't you at least see the movie?'

This remark caused a hurt look to cross Lisa's face. It was a good one, very realistic.

'Hey, I was just kidding,' said Lois, who wasn't easily taken in by false or exaggerated phenomena.

Lisa perked up again on cue and continued. 'That's right, Prince Charming.'

'Well, thanks for saying that, Lisa,' I said. But I wasn't quick enough to head off Christine.

'We usually talk nice about Frank behind his back. But it's okay, you've only been here a week.'

'I'm sorry if it sounded like I was trying to score points or something,' said Lisa, actually sounding quite sincere this time. 'The department where I used to work—'

‘You're not there any more,’ I said. ‘You're here. And everyone here used to work somewhere else in the company.’

‘Except you, Frank,’ said Elias. ‘You've been in this department forever.’

‘True enough,’ I replied.

After the meeting with my staff ended I proceeded immediately to the other meeting, where I intended to play the swine in a way I had never tried before. I had a new idea to present to my colleagues, which of course would involve a considerable amount of arm-waving and look-at-me behavior. It had been some time since I had reaccredited myself with my peers, and I was beginning to suffer from an uncomfortable sense that my standing with these persons was in question.

This is the paradox of always being afraid: while the pangs of apprehension and self-consciousness may allow you to imagine yourself as a being created of finer materials than most, a certain level of such agony necessarily drives you to grovel for the reassurances and approval of swine, or dwarfs if you like, who function as conductors of a fear from which they themselves do not appear to suffer. And how well they're able to control this fear, turning it in your direction at will and causing its dreadful current to flow just long enough to send you running to them so that you may be allowed to make a case for your own swinehood, hoping to prove that you are an even bigger swine, or a smaller dwarf, than they. This is the only thing that can bring some relief from that most pernicious form of being afraid—the anxiety provoked by other people and what they may do to you, either collectively or as individual agents.

Tragically, the same fear that allows you to believe yourself a better specimen of the human species than those around you can only be tolerated for so long. Anything beyond that point, any excess of anxiety, and you begin to imagine yourself closeted in a little room somewhere under heavy sedation or to consider an act of slaughter against yourself (or perhaps against others). Thus I was aching with hopes for my new idea, my special plan to increase the prosperity of the company—that institutional manifestation of the swine. I longed for it to receive the snuffling high-sign of my fellow wallowers in filth, the low-voiced sanction (or so I hoped) of the seven o*ther* dwarfs. Needless to say, I was terror-stricken.

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As usual I was the first to arrive in the conference room where I met with the six other supervisors in the division and with Richard, our manager. This room was located outside the modernized office space wherein most of the company carried out its activities and was a place that still exhibited, unharmed by refurbishing, the pre-Depression style of the building in which the company occupied several floors. I was never sure what purpose the room was originally intended to serve, but it was disproportionately large and lofty for the small talk of business that echoed within its realm. Furthermore, it was quite dimly lighted by the rows of ornately sconced fixtures that jutted out at intervals from faded and intricate wallpaper which had peeled away in spots. One could barely see the crumbled moldings interposed between the upper edges of the walls and the shadowy ceiling.

The table at which I and the others met seemed to have been imported from the banquet hall of an earlier century, while the enormous leather chairs in which our bodies truly appeared of dwarfish size had become brittle over the years and creaked like old floorboards whenever we shifted within them. There was a row of tall paned windows along one of the walls, each of them still valanced but without curtains. I liked to look out of these windows because they offered a view of the river as well as a fine panorama of several other old office buildings.

However, on that particular morning a heavy spring fog had lingered long enough to obstruct any view of the river and had turned the other buildings in the downtown area into specters of themselves, only the nearest of which could be seen to cast their illumination through the fog like strange lighthouses. And I was grateful to the aging monuments of the city for providing me, by no means for the first time, with a calming perspective that only a vision of degeneration and decline can bestow.

Soon enough, though, the others arrived and took their places, setting down upon the already scarred finish of the table their outsized mugs of coffee or towering containers of bottled water. I never failed to wonder how they were able to consume such incredible quantities of coffee, water, fruit juice, and what have you during these meetings, which always went on for at least an hour. I myself made a point of *not* taking in unaccustomed amounts of liquid prior to these weekly convocations, just so that I might avoid the necessity of disrupting the proceedings by bursting out of the room in search of the nearest lavatory.

But none of the others appeared to have the least problem in this area, however closely I scrutinized them for tell-tale signs of stress. Least of all did Richard seem bothered by such bodily strain, since he always showed up with not only the largest container of coffee but also a huge thermos from which he would at least twice refill his great barrel of a cup on which was emblazoned the company logo. Just watching them gulp mouthful after mouthful of their various liquids sometimes brought fantasies of a gleaming row of urinals to my mind. Perhaps they all wore special undergarments, I once considered, and freely relieved themselves as we spoke about budgets and headcounts, speed to market and out-sourcing.

All of which is simply to say that my co-functionaries within the division, along with Richard, were a complete mystery to me on every level. They seemed to me as fantastic beings who well deserved the fairy-tale designation of The Seven Dwarfs, even though there was a more mundane and obvious reason for calling them such. This reason, I should point out, did not derive from any shared qualities between Dopey, Grumpy, Sleepy, and the rest of that cute and hard-working crew, and the seven persons, not including myself, now seated at that nicely decrepit table.

My fellow supervisors, plus Richard, were neither conspicuously cute (with one exception) nor hard-working. But their names were, no kidding, Barry, Harry, Perry, Mary, Kerrie, Sherry, and, of course, Richard, whom I had heard referred to as ‘The Doctor’, although the origin of this nickname, which was a matter of both credible anecdote and curious imaginings, in no way linked him with the dwarfish Doc of the fairy tale.

Richard finally cleared his throat with a forced, rattling sound that was his way of bringing the meeting to order. Everyone stopped chatting and turned toward the head of the table, where sat the only one of us whose chair didn't appear too big for his body. But Richard's stature was more than that of someone who purchased his suits at clothes stores catering to large-bodied men. His physical conformation, straight and solid from head to toe, was imposingly athletic, the anatomy of an erstwhile ball-player of some kind who had kept his shape into middle age. In all probability Richard had garnered his share of shining trophies for the glory of Self and School. He wouldn't be the first member of middle-to-upper-level corporate management with a background in the world of sport, with all the playing-field metaphors they borrowed from that milieu, chief among them being all that puke-inducing nonsense about teams (the characterization of someone as a 'team player' was at the top of my line-up of emetic expressions of this sort).

'All right, then, let's get started,' barked Richard as he stared down at a page on the table that listed the agenda items for that week's meeting. 'Looks like you're first up, Domino. Something to do with New Product.'

For the record: my last name is not Domino; it's Dominio, with two 'i's.

For the record: I had attempted to correct Richard both publicly and privately regarding the accurate form of my surname.

For the record: I could never be absolutely sure that it wasn't pure indifference rather than a taste for malicious mockery that accounted for his persistently calling me Domino, although this sly mangling of my name never failed to

draw a few muted snickers from the others, and Richard could not have been oblivious to that.

Like a dealer at a poker game, I quickly passed around to my colleagues the two-page proposal I had distilled from a much longer document. This hand-out was composed with wide margins and a large font for speedy absorption into the systems of busy middle-management types. I tried not to look around the table as they all glanced it over, turning from page one to page two almost simultaneously. When Richard was finished he laid the document on the table before him and gazed upon it as if he were looking at a bowl of cereal in which he thought he might have spotted something unsavory… or possibly peering into a riverbed in which he glimpsed a shiny nugget in the shallows of clear water.

‘Forgive me, Frank,’ said Richard, ‘but I'm not sure I understand what this is supposed to be?’

I sat up as high as I could in my giant's chair.

‘At the last meeting you said that New Product was putting out one of their rare calls for suggestions for, well, new product ideas. This is a proposal for a new product, possibly an entire line of new product.’

‘That much I comprehend, thank you. It's just, um, this is a little far afield from what I think anyone had in mind.’

‘I realize how it might seem that way. This is why I thought I would bring it up initially at this meeting. I'd consider whatever feedback anyone might have to be of value before I submitted my proposal in full.’

‘There's more to this?’ asked Richard.

‘Quite a bit, yes,’ I said.

‘Hmm. That's really something. I can only wonder where you found the time, given that the rest of us have been

frantically trying to dig our way out of one landslide or another that's threatening to bury us around here.'

'I did almost all of it on my own time, if that's your concern,' I said.

'My only concern,' replied Richard as he slowly looked around the table at the other supervisors, 'my primary concern, I should say, is that the New Product idea you're proposing doesn't look like the sort of thing we do around here. I mean, I'm all for being risky and innovative and all that, but this is... hoo boy.'

'But we *could* do it,' I argued. 'We have the people, the know-how, all the processes in place already.'

'True enough,' admitted Richard. 'But I don't know. Does anyone else have any thoughts about this?'

'It *is* different,' said Perry.

'Definitely different,' said Harry.

'I'm not sure we do in fact have the staff needed to take on something like this,' said Mary.

'I've got fewer people taking on more projects all the time,' said Kerrie.

'*Systemically*,' Barry began, instantly losing the attention of his auditors. At one juncture in his jargon-polluted soliloquy of a business analyst he used the words 'data vamping,' which I believe was a neologism of his own devising. Ultimately, of course, he sided with Richard, concluding that my idea, which Barry explained had built into it at least two, perhaps two *and a half* 'facets', was not 'leverage focused', nor was it 'customerly', in Barry's opinion.

Sherry was at a characteristic loss to add anything to the litany of negation already recited by the others, although she did manage to come up with 'faster, better, cheaper', which

on this occasion might be construed to mean that my proposal was not quite in line with this triple-headed ideal.

By this point I was writhing within the creaking depths of my chair, shaking my head in a slight palsy of horror and forming phrases in my mind that refused to come together into coherent sentences. Then, for a brief moment, the words congealed.

‘I know that the company has traditionally produced only that which looks like what it has previously produced—in other words, recycled impersonations of what we've been doing for the past two decades.’

‘It's called leveraging, Frank. It's what we do, and it's still managing a good margin.’

‘But for how much longer?’

‘Look,’ said Richard, ‘I enjoy brainstorming new ideas as much as the next guy. It's just that, by bringing this to me, to all of us, it's like asking for a sanction of some kind. And that's asking a lot. How about if you hold off on this a while. Give us all some time to think this over and revisit the whole thing at a later date. What do you say?’

‘Sure,’ I said, positive that this matter would never arise again.

‘Fine,’ said Richard. ‘Now let's move on to the next item on the agenda.’

And for the rest of the meeting I tried not to betray my inner turmoil. Moreover, I couldn't keep my mind from its obsession with a new terror: the sense that I had been the victim of an ambush—that no scheme that I might have advanced before that particular gathering stood a chance, that whatever plan I had brought to that meeting and laid upon that time-ravaged table would have died there.

Outside the windows of that antiquated room the fog was slowly fading away, revealing once again a view of the river and a cityscape in which my mind moved among scenes of calming decay.

3

Fear, when blended with failure, distills into a deadly brew. I had been so caught up in what I thought was the brilliance of my new idea, my special plan, that I never seriously pondered the consequences of it being rejected out of hand by the very persons I most wanted to accept it. This was a miscalculation of vast proportions, no question about it. For the rest of that morning, as I sat in my supervisor's cubicle, I could do nothing but inwardly reproach myself for being a creature of deranged judgment… and not even that: I was no more than a primitive organism with no faculty of judgment whatever, a slick of slime mold posing as a human being. 'You're making too much of this,' said one of those secondary selves that are implanted inside every one of us and that come to attention on these occasions, spitting forth idiotic clichés like a mad schoolmaster from a worn-out textbook of conventional wisdom. 'In the grand scheme of things,' the voice continued before I grabbed it with both hands and wrung its neck, spitting out my words of contempt through gritted teeth—

A: There is no grand scheme of things.

B: If there were a grand scheme of things, the fact—the *fact*—that we are not equipped to perceive it, either by natural or supernatural means, is a nightmarish obscenity.

C: The very notion of a grand scheme of things is a nightmarish obscenity.

When Galileo brought his findings before the board of directors at Vatican Inc., he was at least armed with facts that reasonably supported his botched attempt to deal with those who endorsed the obscene notion of a grand scheme of things. He could *know* that he was right, even though he was also an utter fool for sharing what he knew with the wrong people.

I couldn't know anything about the worth of my idea, my plan; its value resided exclusively in the estimation of the people around me, especially Richard. It didn't matter—not even to me—whether or not it would prove to be a source of profit to the company, in the unlikely event that the greater powers of that commercial entity ever acted on my plans. Most initiatives did not amount to much. The important thing was to demonstrate that my four cloven feet were skittering swinishly in the same direction as those of everyone else. The debacle that took place at the meeting that foggy morning merely served to give away what I most wanted to hide: that I was moving in an entirely different direction from the rest of them.

My only recourse now was to follow Galileo's example and recant my ridiculous idea, my special plan. Why my mind had brought forth such a scheme had begun to confound even me. I knew what I was supposed to say and do in my position at the company, and those duties did not involve any kind of innovation or brilliance whatever. From that moment I forswore such things as abominations and vowed never again to conceive a new thought or scheme or plan unless bidden to do so, a task I knew would never be inflicted on me. I would say and do only that which I was supposed to say and do. That was all. That and only that.

But as my mind was still spinning in this groove of histrionic vows and disavowals, swearings and swearings off, the hulking shape of Richard appeared at the entrance to my cubicle.

'Got a minute?' he asked.

'Sure,' I said as he was already stepping into my workspace and making himself at home. In his fist was a copy of the two-page hand-out delineating the proposal I had proffered earlier that morning.

'Okay, here's how it is. Number one—I'm not saying that I'm going to make myself a signatory to any of this, or that I endorse it in any way,' he said, lightly shaking at me the two-page hand-out he was holding. 'Number two—I don't want you to think that I'm a complete villain and that my function around here is to squash your spirit every chance I get. Therefore, I've decided to pass this along to New Product—no special delivery, no marching bands or fanfare, just push it into their mailbox and see what they make of it. Cut this down to a single page, a half-page would be even better, and send it to me. I'll forward it to the NP crew along with some other communiqués I have for them. Can you live with that?'

'Yes, I can. Thanks very much.'

I sounded casual enough, or so I believed, but at that moment I could not help feeling a curative relief streaming through my system. I had been saved. And despite all the bitter renunciations that had echoed over and over only moments before in the darkness inside me, I had now become swollen with gratitude. Was this how Richard had acquired his rumored nickname? Thank you, Doc!

‘Maybe we can even fit in your product idea for further discussion at next week's meeting,’ continued Richard. ‘How's that sound?’

‘Sounds fine.’

‘All right, then,’ said Richard, turning to exit my cubicle. But he caught himself in mid-turn and doubled back. ‘Uh, Frank,’ he said in what sounded to me a lowered tone of voice.

‘Yes?’

‘Along with the memo for New Product, perhaps you should forward to me the rest of the work you've done on this,’ Richard said, once again rattling the two-page hand-out in the air.

‘As I said at the meeting, I worked on this almost entirely at home. And that's where it is right now. Some of it's still in hand-written form. I'll clean it all up and send it to you as soon as I can, if that's okay.’ I hadn't missed a beat in my response to Richard's request, and yet for an unmeasurable splinter of a moment I saw him turn to stone before my eyes and fix a granite gaze upon me.

‘Of course,’ he said.

After Richard walked off I waited until I thought it was safe, and then I collapsed my upper body across the counter of my cubicle. *He knew*, I thought. He knew I was lying to him. I had the entire proposal on a disk and printed out in polished form as a stack of fiftysome pages in the lower drawer of my desk. I opened the drawer to check that its contents were actually still there. They were, even though for some delirious reason I thought they might not be. I touched the disk and flipped through the pages several times. They were still there. I closed the desk drawer. Then I

opened it again and repeated my inspection a few more times before finally locking the drawer and placing the key inside my wallet.

What I still could not understand was the reason for my deception. It had been committed as an act of pure instinct, without any rational basis. It couldn't have been that I was afraid that Richard was going to steal my proposal and arrange to take credit for it himself, I thought. Others had done that to me over the years, and I was never the least put out by their betrayal. I wasn't looking to move any higher in the company than my present position, so why should I care about making time with anyone but my immediate superior?

I wanted to stay where I was, I wanted to keep my working life securely in the status quo, and I wanted to be left alone. This had been the motive for all my actions in my job. This was why employees of a similar disposition transferred to my department whenever there was an opening. We were a troupe of contented parasites, self-made failures, and complacent losers. What lives we had were carried on entirely outside the psychic perimeter of the company. We did our jobs and did them as well as or better than anyone else in that organization. And then we went home and spent time with our families or worked in our gardens or painted pictures or simply did nothing at all. Whatever we sought to attain in this precarious and—in all candor—wretched world, we looked for *outside the company*.

Of course I could always send my full proposal the very next day, and Richard could then do with it what he wished. In that sense I had done myself no special harm. But he would still know that I had lied to him, and I had no idea what that might mean.

4

Three days passed. On each of those days immediately upon waking from my senseless or scary dreams, I said to myself, ‘Today I'm going to send Richard the document of my plan.’ At the end of each day, having sent nothing to Richard, I said to myself, ‘Tomorrow, without fail, I'm going to send Richard the document of my plan.’

So why was I stalling in this matter? Why was I setting out on a course that was clearly one of self-destruction, compounding my existing offense of having lied to Richard with that of blatant contempt for his instructions to send him the complete document of my plan? A provisional answer to this question came to me slowly over the course of those three days. And it had begun with that weekly meeting at which I felt myself to be the victim of ambush by all of them, not only Richard. His was simply the biggest and most hideous head of the monster: six others also emanated from the body of the beast, circling on long, snaky necks about the expansive and twisted face at the center of the thing, with its bloodshot eyes and killing breath (Richard did in sooth have a case of halitosis that could gag a maggot). Several incidents over this three-day period supported, however subtly, my seven-against-one theory. Each of these incidents was apparently isolated. Some of them, I would have been quick to concede, were quite possibly without any nefarious intent or significance. I list them here in sequential order, with subheads to forecast the main players involved in these vignettes. So here we go, beginning with—

Perry

Later on Monday, the day of the weekly meeting, I was passing through the company's reception area. This was a plushly carpeted, softly lighted, and expensively decorated space that served both to impress and intimidate anyone who entered it, particularly first-time visitors such as new-job applicants waiting to be summoned for an interview, business people waiting to be summoned by whomever was their contact within the company, or simply some kid delivering pizzas.

Among the appointments of this area was a grand piano, which no one in the company ever touched... except Perry. It was not an unusual sight, especially around lunchtime, to see him either approaching, walking away from, hovering over, or actually playing that piano. Fortunately for all concerned he never played for very long. What he did play was invariable. Perry's repertoire, judging by what I heard, consisted wholly of a series of jazzy-sounding chord changes that he would ham-fistedly pound out, following this racket with a tinkly right-hand flourish on the upper keys.

This activity was but a single element of the jazz-world image of himself that Perry appeared to hold and evidently desired to convey to others, although he did so in a haphazard, or perhaps half-hearted, manner. Overall, Perry was simply not a very jazzy individual. And he was intelligent and self-reflective enough to realize this fact. Nonetheless, from whatever mysterious motives, Perry was willing to settle for a Halloween costume version of Mr Jazz that consisted of a few props, a stereotyped gesture or two, and a plastic mask. Aside from the piano-playing and some talk about the latest CD of jazz music he had purchased, the most conspicuous aspect of Perry's jazzy persona was his eye-

glasses, which were the precise type of thick-framed, heavily tinted jobs sported by cool-jazz artists of the 1950s in photographs on the back covers of several prominent record albums of the period. Now, I myself wore eyeglasses (contemporary in design), the lenses of which had a slight amber tint blended into them, although I had opted for this feature on the advice of an optometrist. (I never met an eye doctor or a dentist who wasn't a hustler at heart. Let's not even talk about physicians or—puh!—those bloodletters of the mind with a psychiatric shingle outside their door.) The optometrist suggested that such tinting would better enable my defective sight to tolerate the fluorescent lights of the office as well as the sort of illumination radiated by the screens of televisions and... boy, do I hate to even use the word: computers—there, I said it.

As previously mentioned, I was merely passing through the company's reception area. My destination was elsewhere on that floor, where I needed to attend a meeting that concerned some routine function of my job. The piano was so positioned that Perry's jazz-oriented fumblings were being conducted with his back to me as I quietly passed by. So there was no call for me to shout out a hello or disturb the genius jazzer in any way.

But just as I was about to move out of Perry's range, I saw that his head turned to look at me over his shoulder. Of course I couldn't very well have halted in my tracks at that point and acknowledged that I had seen him look at me over his shoulder in what I thought to be a highly devious and menacing way, his eyes fully shaded by the soft lighting of the reception area reflecting off his heavily tinted glasses. At the same moment that he turned his head in my direction,

Perry ended his musical performance not with a tinkling flourish on the upper keys of the piano but with a dissonant cluster of notes made by a smash of his left hand on the lowest register of the keyboard. The cacophonous growl of these notes followed me as I made it around a corner and began walking down a long and brilliantly fluorescent hallway on my way to the meeting, which happened to include—

Mary

There she stood some distance down the hallway, only a few feet from the open door of the meeting room, frozen for a second in a pose I had seen her assume before. I thought of it as her 'pre-entry pose', a posture she took on for a fraction of a second during which she seemed to stiffen even more than usual, as if to collect and consolidate herself both mentally and physically before entering a given public forum. Mary was in her fifties and availed herself—from her fluffy-haired head to her pointy high-heels—of all the sartorial and cosmetic armor that was possible for one woman to bear. When viewed in her pre-entry pose, or really at any time when she was not speaking or jotting things in her scheduling book or engaged in some movement or other, she could easily be taken for a mannikin, even at the closest quarters.

Without turning her head toward me—I didn't need that from a mannikin—she entered the meeting room… and I followed close behind.

In the course of this meeting, another regular, weekly affair—this one focusing on schedules of production—Mary found the occasion to remark, 'Of course, Frank's department won't be able to meet this deadline,' without qualifying

this statement with the reason, which she well knew, for this fact.

‘We're still in the process of testing the new software’, I explained for the benefit of anyone at the meeting who might not have known why there was a temporary decline in the productivity of my department. The word ‘software’, as usual, stuck a bit in my throat and came out sounding a bit cracked.

‘Of course, we understand,’ said Mary while jotting away in her multi-ringed scheduling notebook, not giving the slightest glance my way, as if I had just ineptly attempted to excuse myself and my staff on false grounds.

So the damage, even if it was restricted entirely to atmospherics rather than facts, was done. And well done.

No further encounters took place that day between myself and The Seven—let's just call them that from now on and skip the dwarf part. As far as I'm concerned, fairy tales and legends, mythologies of all times and places, are just festering vestiges of a world that, for better or worse, is dead, dead, dead. Human life is not a *quest* or an *odyssey* or any of that romantic swill which is force-fed to us from our tenderest years to our dying day. All right, then, as Richard, like so many of his intrepid type, would say.

The next run-in I had with one of The Seven didn't occur until the following morning, Tuesday, when I looked up and saw standing at the entrance to my cubicle—

Kerrie

‘Do you have any postage stamps you could spare?’ she asked. ‘I've got to get a credit card payment in the mail pronto.’

I was in the middle of conferring with Lois about the earlier-mentioned software my staff was testing when Kerrie (anorexic and bird-beaked, with a squarish Marine Corps haircut) interrupted us.

'Yeah, I think I've got some,' I said. But what I thought was, 'Why is Kerrie borrowing postage stamps from *me*?' She's the person to whom everyone in the division appeals when they've run out of stamps. The answer, which I heard with one ear as I rummaged through some desk drawers, was rambling out of Kerrie's own mouth.

'Somebody stole all mine. Took a whole roll, not even opened, right out of my desk drawer. I'll have to start hiding the things. Everybody knows where I keep them.'

'Here you go,' I said as I turned in my chair and held out to her a crumpled packet with a few stamps left in it. At the same moment I saw Kerrie pick something up from my cubicle counter.

'Hey, what's this?' she asked, or, more accurately, accused.

What was this indeed, I thought, as I saw Kerrie handling the unopened roll of stamps. Lois, who was seated in a chair between Kerrie and myself, was trying to make herself discreetly invisible by fixing her eyes firmly upon some dimensionless point on the carpet.

'Kerrie,' I said, 'I have no idea where those came from.'

'I just bet you don't, Frank,' said Kerrie before she turned and marched away.

'Lois,' I said, 'did you see those stamps when you came in here?'

Lois materialized from her invisibility and replied, 'No, but I didn't not see them either. I mean, if someone should

want to make a big deal about it… what could I say?'

'Do you think I might have stolen Kerrie's stamps?'

'Not for a second,' she shot back so fast that her words nearly overlapped my own. 'How could you even ask me that?'

'Sorry,' I said.

'Apology accepted,' said Lois. 'But just because I know you didn't take Kerrie's lousy stamps—'

'Yeah, it looks bad,' I said.

'Yes, it does,' Lois agreed.

That, of course, was exactly why Kerrie made sure that Lois was present as a witness. This enabled Kerrie to say, 'My stamps were missing… and I found them on Frank's desk. Go ahead, ask Lois—she was there.' And what could Lois say but, 'Yes, I was there. I saw Kerrie pick up a roll of stamps from Frank's desk.' Of course she could refuse to discuss the subject, but obviously that would only further incriminate me, suggesting not only that Lois witnessed the event but that she also considered it too sordid to speak of. Kerrie had thus crafted a set-up for which I had no possible defense in the Court of Rumor, even if nothing could be positively proved against me.

In contrast to the bold tactics of Kerrie were the effortless subversions of—

Harry

An affable enigma is the only way I can describe him. Always nattily attired, a politely attentive aura hovering somewhere about his person whenever one spoke to him, always willing to 'get right on' things anyone asked him to do, always willing to 'follow through' with things whenever any-

one made a request of him… and never, ever, doing any of these things.

Consequently I was not entirely unnerved when Harry returned none of my phone messages (no one expected to speak to a living Harry when they dialed his extension). It was only when I took Harry's customary black-out on all transmissions coming from me and later added it to Richard's unusual and ominous inattention to my doings throughout the rest of that week, when normally he would have been looking over my shoulder at every opportunity, that I became concerned.

But when it came to matters involving Harry, there was not much of which I could really be sure. What a master in the making he was, even if the truest candidate for better things, faster things, but in no sense cheaper things was—

Barry

He was the most apparent of all the potential heirs to Richard's position when the day came that the one-time star quarterback (or record-breaking baseball pitcher or whatever), for one reason or another, departed from our division, our company, or the world entirely. Seemingly Barry was only passing through on a brief tour of duty as a departmental supervisor in the division. He came to us reputedly as a person who possessed highly evolved organizational skills, which he had demonstrated in a number of other hotspots throughout the company. When he arrived in our midst he was already widely celebrated—both behind his wide back and to his plump, fast-talking face—for his big brain and his freakish talent for ‘sizing things up’, for bring-

ing law and order to the company's most unruly frontiers and outposts.

My own sources informed me that the only reason that anyone with whom Barry worked endorsed his gifts so vigorously was to expedite his departure from their precincts, foisting him off on some unsuspecting department that could use some 'revving up' and benefit from the rare potency of his well-endowed frontal lobe. And thus arose the legend of Barry the Brain, Barry the Organizer, and, most unfortunately, Barry the Re-Organizer. Wherever he went in the wildernesses of the company he was given a free hand to revise the charts and maps, the processes and procedures that had always seemed to work so well... until he got his meaty hands on them. Because, in fact, as Barry moved with mighty strides from one position to another in the company, he left nothing but chaos, confusion, and conflict in the dust behind him.

In my own observation I could understand how he might be taken for a person of super-developed organizational skills, if only because he showed himself to be cruelly intolerant of the least lack of organization on the part of those around him, using his mile-a-minute mouth, his tireless zest for charts and graphs that no one else could comprehend (due to their over-determined complexity), and his utterly bogus reputation to call into question the qualifications of anyone who questioned his.

Yet there was a time when I actually empathized with this man, who obviously suffered from the same clinical disorder (obsessive-compulsive) with which I myself was plagued, although I struggled to hide my mania, which manifested itself in ways that could not help me in my career, rather than

parading it for all to see. But the time for empathy had passed when I arrived at work earlier than usual on Wednesday of that week. I wasn't at all surprised that Barry was in the office at that early hour, although my inner alarm went off when I saw him marauding about the region of my cubicle, moving, as he always did, at a comically brisk pace for a man of his heftiness.

'Barry,' I said by way of greeting.

'Frank,' he returned, his voice dopplering into the distance.

Then, immediately upon entering my cubicle to begin my work that day, I jumped back as if a wild animal had leapt out at me. My own obsessiveness did not involve a fastidious sense of organization, but there was my work-space... and it was trim. I didn't think for a moment that the housekeeping staff of the building had gone on a rampage of tidiness where my cubicle was concerned. No others in the area betrayed such treatment, as I noted after a short and secretive investigation.

Okay, so I got the message: 'Barry was here,' it read as if spelled out in pushpins on my bulletin board. What of it? I thought—I had nothing to hide. Then my own variety of obsession took over, and I practically dove for the desk drawer which contained all the electronic and printed documentation of my proposal, my new-product idea, my special plan. I was on my hands and knees staring at the dark metal face of the drawer. I wanted to dust it for fingerprints, use a magnifying glass to examine it for the tiniest signs of forced entry, test with a micrometer if the lock had been tampered with by foreign hands. Of course, none of that would have alleviated my anxiety, and, in time, still on my hands and knees, I

finally grasped the handle of the drawer and gave it a heart-stopping pull. It was still locked, for whatever that was worth. And that was worth nothing, because someone could have picked the lock on the drawer, taken its contents, and closed it back up again.

Pulling my wallet from my back pocket and fumbling around for the key, I then opened the drawer. Everything that had been inside before was still inside, yet I nonetheless wanted my print kit, magnifying glass, and micrometer to judge if anything had been disturbed. In addition to the documents locked away in that drawer was a folder of photographs of sites around the city, photographs which I had been taking for years. I had many more such folders at home, full of pictures of alleys and abandoned houses, boarded-up churches, a derelict library (with interior photos of fallen shelves and moldy books strewn across a gritty floor). Most precious to me was a series of photos I took of a place where there stood a crooked street-sign but no longer any street deserving of the name—just some rubble along a path and a few relics of unidentifiable structures on either side of that path.

To the naked eye everything in my desk drawer seemed in order, but it was still possible that Barry had opened the drawer some time before my arrival at work that morning, photocopied the printed version of my document, electronically copied the electronic version of my document, and replaced it with the painstaking precision that only another obsessive could achieve.

‘What are you doing down there?’ asked the voice of Barry the Detective, Barry the Spy.

I slammed the drawer closed, too afraid to realize that I was giving myself away.

'I was taking something out of my pocket and a quarter popped out. Rolled under my desk.' *Something* out of my pocket? That would not cut it with Barry. It had to be specific. But I did say a *quarter*, not just a coin. 'Did you want something from me?' I asked.

'Yes, I did,' replied Barry in a leisurely manner, uncharacteristically so. He then walked away, also in a leisurely manner.

Barry the Mover, Barry the Shaker.

Barry walked. And talked.

In a *leisurely* manner.

I opened the drawer again and checked its contents, touching the (lousy computer!) disk and rifling through the fiftysome pages of the printed document. Then I locked the drawer. Then I opened the drawer and repeated this ritual as needed throughout the day. I should have taken the goods and gone back home that morning. That would have to wait, though, until the work-day's end. Because, as bad luck would have it, I needed to finish up some small project and pass it on to—

Sherry

I stayed as close to my cubicle as I could during that day. I managed to forego trips to the men's room and went without leaving the building for lunch at the Metro Diner, which was actually a daily pleasure—an escape rather—and not part of any ritualistic behavior. But at some point I needed to pass on this small, this eency-weency project to Sherry. The deadline was two o'clock.

I thought that perhaps I could get Sherry to pick up the work at my cubicle, rather than my having to transport it all the way across the floor to hers. However, she wasn't responding to my phone messages either, nor to the half-hourly messages I sent to her... machine.

When the time came to make the delivery I tried to do it as fast as possible, striding at the speed of Barry to Sherry's cubicle, which was near the door leading outside the company's office space and into the hallway, where one could still see the pre-Depression style of the building and enjoy cracked walls and moldings, the dusty globes of dim light that depended from lengthy, tarnished chains running down from the high ceiling, and the creaky railings and banisters that lined the stairwell soaring both upward and downward into the most suggestive shadows I had ever seen.

Arriving at Sherry's cubicle, however, I found that the hand-off was not going to work as smoothly as I hoped.

'Sherry,' I said.

'Could you wait a sec?' she replied, very much preoccupied with digging something out of her purse. I realized that it was more than she could handle, taking delivery of this nit-sized project *and* digging something out of her purse. She would have to finish the one before she could turn her mental resources to the other, that's all there was to it.

I declared earlier in this document that, 'with one exception,' there was no cuteness among The Seven. Sherry was the exception, although a serious qualification must be appended to this statement. Physically she was attractive, not to the point of being a harrowing beauty, but enough to put her over the line between women of average or even 'good' looks into the company of those who possessed across-the-

room attraction. (If anyone believes that I'm perpetuating some arbitrary or twisted image of the world, that's fine with me—I wish them well in their transactions with social reality.) The qualification to which I made reference above is this: if you happened to cross that room on the other side of which stood Sherry, what you confronted was... I can't even name it—some kind of *thing* inhabiting the body of an attractive woman, an alien from some diseased planet or a creature of low evolutionary stature that by some curious means had insinuated itself into a human being at some stage in her development, the result being this Sherry-thing.

If she closed her eyes and didn't speak Sherry could indeed pass for an attractive human female. But the moment she spoke or the moment her thing-like eyes came into view, she became a Gorgon (no mythic significance intended or necessary). This duality that Sherry embodied could often be a source of tremendous conflict to those around her, who one moment would experience the tide-pull of her figure and the next moment, when she happened to speak or the image of her eyes loomed up, would be inwardly retching with disgust at the very existence of this Sherry-thing, as well as heaving away inside with self-revulsion for having felt an attraction to this creature. And at the moment I was standing at her desk, Sherry's eyes were turned away from me and I had already forgotten the sound of the few words she had spoken.

So I stood and watched as she dug around for something in her purse, and the deeper she dug the more she shifted about in her chair, causing her already short and close-fitting dress to rise higher and higher toward her buttocks. I was transfixed, turning to stone, until the door leading out

into the hallway opened and someone entered the company's office space. This particular someone was Betty, one of the higher vice-presidents in the company. I saw that it was Betty because, having emerged from my fixated staring at Sherry, I now noticed that palmed within her right hand was a small mirror in which she was watching Betty watching me watching her. Sherry then giggled and turned around.

'Hi, Betty,' she said.

'Hello, Sherry,' Betty said.

But Betty had no hellos for Frank after she had seen me looking at Sherry in a way that I never wanted to be seen. Her face merely exhibited a look of disgust (at me!) before she continued on her way.

'Now, what've you got there, Frank?' said Sherry.

Without a word I dropped the folder containing the project on her desk and, for the first time that day, made a visit to the men's room.

5

It was now Friday, and there had been no communication between myself and Richard since Monday. As a formality I decided to check with someone in New Product to confirm whether or not Richard had delivered my truncated version of the two-page proposal that I had shown to The Seven on the first day of that week.

No surprise: New Product had no record of such a proposal with my name attached to it. No surprise: they were no longer even soliciting ideas for New Product and rarely, if ever, did.

No surprise: New Product was as much a mystery to me in its purpose and function as every other division in the

company.

Surprise: a ‘freeze’ had been placed on all activities involving New Product until the upcoming ‘restructuring’ of the company had been set in motion and the company had ‘relocated’ its whole operation (more than likely to some nice new high-rise in the suburbs, thereby fleeing the luxuriant rot of the city in which it had resided for over two decades).

While the aforementioned changes within the company were news to me, and big news at that, none of it seemed to have the least force of reality behind it. This was more or less the case with all occasions of ‘moment’ within that particular working world, and perhaps all others: so often there would be the promise of either some cataclysm or some bright new age on the horizon; but whatever it was, however it might seem to the imagination, it would unfailingly come and go like a thunderstorm through which one had slept, leaving a few puddles and some small tree branches scattered upon the ground as the only evidence that anything at all had happened. Every milestone in the history of the company, even when forecast with heaps of hoopla, was ultimately played out according to some secret timeline of geologic tedium, so that it was drained of all interest and drama well before it took place and afterward went all but unnoticed. And the days rolled by, and one grew older, and none of it seemed to possess the least import or substance. Finally, looking back from the deathbed of your entire life in the working world, you would be left exclaiming, ‘What was that all about!’ (In this sense the world of the company mirrored the world itself, which sometimes managed to stage a rousing first act, and perhaps even provide a few en-

gaging scenes of a second before devolving into a playwright's nightmare, wherein the actors either butchered their lines or entirely forgot them, scenery collapsed, props misfired, and most of the audience left the theater during intermission.)

Nevertheless, the information that had leaked out to me from New Product served as sufficient excuse to get together over lunch with a friend of mine within the company. (Yes, I did have a friend or two in that place which I have thus far painted so darkly.) I dialed his extension and actually reached a living person on the other end of the line.

'Hey, Frank,' I said. Not only did we share the same given name, but both of us had also labored 'forever,' as one of my staff put it, within our respective departments.

'Yeah, Frank.'

'Got any lunch plans?'

'Do I ever?'

Of course he didn't. Frank kept very much to himself as a rule. Somehow he had managed to remain on an even lower rung of the company ladder than I had over a comparably long... career, I suppose you would call it. That alone earned him my deep respect. He also knew quite a lot about the company and its personnel that normally would have meant nothing to me.

But that week had been anything but normal, and aside from what I had to tell Frank about the info I acquired from New Product that morning, there was something I wanted to ask him which served as my prime motivation for my requesting a lunchtime audience with my namesake.

I had been waiting outside a few minutes before Frank emerged from the revolving doors of the old building, put on

his sunglasses, and lit up a cigarette.

‘The usual place?’ Frank asked.

‘Unless there's somewhere else you'd prefer,’ I said.

He just smiled, and we both started walking the mile or so to our destination, weaving through the regular cast of suits and street-people, Frank looking down at the sidewalk as he smoked one cigarette after another while I alternated my gaze between the street level—cheap clothes stores, cheap electronics stores, liquor-lotto-and-checks-cashed-here stores, wig shops, pawn shops, gun shops—and the Beaux-Arts skyline of the ever-receding past.

The Metro Diner was located just beyond the fringes of the central downtown area of the city. When we walked in I looked over toward the counter, behind which stood Lillian Hayes, the woman who owned and had operated the diner for the past thirty years or so. I caught her eye and smiled, and she gave a little wave my way. Then Frank and I settled into a booth toward the back.

‘How's the Sloppy Burger these days?’ Frank asked.

‘Still sloppy. Still the best.’

‘That's for me, then,’ he announced as he stubbed out his cigarette in a crusted ashtray that had a little metal band arching over it with grooves in which lighted cigarettes could be secured. ‘You don't see these things much any more,’ Frank observed, examining the ashtray with the eye of the most sensitive lover of downtrodden artifacts. ‘There's something about it, you know?’

‘I know,’ I said. ‘There's a Japanese word for it—*wabi*.’

‘Wa-BEE,’ repeated Frank, who didn't require a verbal definition of the word to understand its meaning.

There was a lot about the Metro Diner that shared this same quality, which was the primary reason I had been an habitué of the place for many years. I also lived in the back-stairs apartment above the diner, for which Lillian charged me a modest monthly rent.

Over our Sloppy Burgers I told Frank about the restructuring of the company I had heard about, which elicited from him only a shrug of profound uninterest. Then I told him about the relocation, which interested him only from the practical standpoint of travel-time to and from work.

'Is that it?' Frank asked.

'Not quite,' I said.

'What? Somebody die?'

'No,' I said.

'You're leaving the company. Great.'

'No, I'm not leaving the company, Frank.'

'Then what?' he asked.

'A question,' I said with a deliberate gravity that Frank just as deliberately ignored.

'Okay, shoot.'

'Frank, why is Richard called The Doctor?'

Frank smiled and pushed aside the plate on which only a few ketchup-soaked fries remained. Then he slowly, almost ritualistically lit up a cigarette.

'This is going to cost you lunch, you know that, don't you?'

'Done,' I agreed.

'You really don't know about this? I mean, if you know that Richard's called The Doctor in the first place, you should know the reason why.'

‘Well, I don't. I'm not even sure how I know what I know. I think I overheard it somewhere. Maybe it's a false memory, I don't know. But my feeling is that this is not something I should be asking just anybody at the company.’

‘You're right about that,’ Frank said. ‘You ask the wrong person what you just asked me and you might end up on your way out.’

‘Yeah, I understand that there've been people who were fired for one reason or another because of Richard. So he's a PhD in office politics—that much I know.’

‘Wrong. The title of “doctor” is ironic,’ Frank explained. ‘Here's the reason. Richard has no fewer than three suicides to his credit—two women, one guy. I can't believe you don't know this.’

‘You know me, Frank. I keep my head in the sand. It feels good down there.’

‘I know, “Stay stupid, stay alive”,’ Frank said. ‘But that motto doesn't apply when it comes to Richard. I knew the family of the guy who *did* himself. He actually named Richard in his suicide note, but there was nothing that the family could do—legally, I mean. He was a head case to begin with anyway. One of the women who killed herself didn't leave a note, but it wasn't hard to put cause and effect together. Rumor was she had had an affair with Richard. This was back when he was in… whatever division he was in before he came to live with us.’

‘And the other woman?’ I asked.

Frank paused to light another cigarette. ‘This is the best one. It happened a couple months before you started at the company. This chick slit her wrists right in Richard's office. Died spread out over his desk, blood running everywhere.’

‘Like a dead patient on an operating table.’

‘Right. It was that one that got him the name The Doctor. Before that little incident the guy was in line to become CEO. He should have been running the company a long time ago. Who knows where he'd be now? Definitely not the manager of our hole-in-the-wall division. Even the other suicides wouldn't have made any difference. If anything they only enhanced his résumé as a real powerhouse exec. But the dead girl in the office—that didn't look too good.’

‘I think we'd better head back,’ I said, looking at my watch.

On the way out I waved goodbye to Lillian, and she waved back to me.

‘Frank, I hope you didn't ask me about Richard because you're having some problem with him,’ said Frank as we retraced our route back to the building.

At the time I could neither confirm nor deny that this was the case.

6

There are some people who attest that they do not remember their dreams, who have never known what it's like to awake screaming or half-insane or merely trembling from the aftershock of a nightmare. These are not necessarily simple-minded persons or happy persons or persons of stunted imaginations. But somehow they have retained a lifelong innocence, never knowing the dread some feel upon approaching the bedroom and facing that descent into the darkness of unknown worlds that may range from cartoonish absurdity to quaking horror. They are very lucky people. I wish I were one of them.

Over the weekend I tried to put the office out of my mind like a

Bad Dream

This task was made considerably more difficult by the new nightmares that began visiting me, ones in which a sleep-world version of Richard took center stage. In these dreams I found myself back at the company, a place that resembled the dimestore I used to visit when I was a kid.

In the real dimestore there was a corner that served as a miniature pet shop where living merchandise was on display. Several aquariums held a variety of small fish, and terrariums featured chameleons or tar-colored reptiles of some type that lay motionless against the glass. Parakeets twittered in bell-shaped cages, while guinea pigs and gerbils scampered about in square, smelly cages. I was walking slowly up and down the aisles, in my dimestore nightmares, fearful of drawing attention to myself. The reason I walked so slowly was that the floors were made of soft slats of wood which creaked with every step I took, and I didn't want to be seen by Richard, who was over in the corner with the caged animals.

He was doing something terrible to them, although I couldn't specify what it was.

But his fingers were able to reach between the closely spaced bars of the cages and could penetrate the glass of the fish tanks and the terrariums. I wanted to know what he was doing to these animals, but I was too afraid to look. And there were voices whispering to me about Richard. ‘He's fixing them,’ the voices said, answering the unspoken question in my fearful mind. ‘Why is he called The Doctor?’ I asked

aloud, addressing no one. ‘He's here to fix them,’ the voices reiterated, as if somehow meaning both to reassure and to frighten me at the same time.

I wanted to run out of the store, but the front entrance through which I had entered was now only a blank wall. The only way out was through the back door in the corner where Richard was occupied with the animals. He seemed fairly engrossed in whatever horrible things he was doing, and I thought that if I could run fast enough I could make it past him and escape through the back. When I finally reached my destination, fighting my way through the resistant atmosphere of the dream dimestore, I found that the doors were locked. I tried to kick the doors open, but then I saw that their glass was reinforced by criss-crossing veins of metal wire. Before I woke up screaming, Richard turned his head to look my way and then reached out to grab me. But his hands weren't hands. They were

Great White Gloves

But these gloves didn't have the requisite number of fingers on them. I had seen them before... and not just in dreams. Because nothing in dreams is original; it's all plagiarized from waking life. And the gloves in the dream were merely a frightening reflection of something I had come upon earlier that Saturday afternoon.

There was a derelict warehouse that was located just outside the downtown area. For some time I had intended to make an excursion there in order to look around inside and take some photographs before the city had the place sealed up. I was not in any sense an expert photographer, and my equipment was not in the least sophisticated or expensive. I

took my pictures in color—not the black-and-white of a serious photographic artist—and brought my film to a local drugstore for processing.

While I certainly desired to retain a record of the sites I had visited around the city over the years, my picture-taking was something of an excuse to justify and explain (both to myself and to anyone else who might wonder) my presence in the city's many regions that had passed from squalor to abandonment, from abandonment to decay, and from decay into the ultimate stages of degeneration that bordered upon complete disappearance from this world. It was not the *wabi* of battered but still useful objects that I was seeking; it was the *sabi* of things utterly dejected and destitute, alone and forgotten—whatever was submitting to its essential impermanence, its transitory nature, whatever was teetering on the brink of non-existence that was the fate of everything that had ever been and awaited everything that would ever be... every person, every place, every purpose, and every plan that could possibly be conceived. This, in a nutshell, was what brought me to explore, and to photographically document, the exterior shell and the interior spaces of a derelict warehouse that Saturday afternoon.

This place was not unlike many others to which I had made similar excursions. From outside one couldn't say for sure what purpose the structure, which occupied almost half a city block (not including the field of weeds and broken concrete adjacent to the building), had once served. The words painted across its side had been reduced by time and the elements to a few fragmented letters which themselves had all but found their way to the other side of invisibility. But I had already gained enough experience in these matters to be able

to distinguish a derelict *factory* from a derelict *warehouse*. And once inside, entering through a doorway without a door, I found that I was correct in my judgment.

I should say that it was not my customary practice as an aficionado of modern ruins to invade their interiors. There were several good reasons for this.

One: there were physical risks when one disturbed the sensitive spaces of deteriorating structures—every footstep had the potential of setting off a chain reaction of collapsing walls, stairways, overhead fixtures, and the like.

Two: these places frequently served as home-ground for various persons who had nowhere else to call home, the cast-offs and losers of a world that had no use for them and did everything it could to push them further and further into exile, because the presence of these living ghosts, these ambulatory spirits, was simply too haunting to be tolerated, provoking a dismal reminder of something that must be ignored at all costs... for these specters were not merely human detritus that the rest of us had left behind, but also citizens of a future that awaits all the empires infesting this earth, not to mention the imminent fall of those fragile homelands of flesh which we each inhabit. And even though I already had taken several psychological steps into their desperate world, I felt too much fear of these precocious residents of oblivion to advance any further.

Three: the sad and tranquil pleasures of *sabi* that lured me to these old piles were best enjoyed at a distance, in suggestive long-shot views of desolate scenes rather than too-clear close-ups of some hopeless drunk or drug addict urinating against a wall.

Yet there are some structures that draw you into them, inviting you inside to wallow in their degraded wonders. From the first time I visited the site of this derelict warehouse, which I had already photographed from the outside, I knew that this was one of those places, if only because its exterior offered so little in the way of outward suggestiveness—a nameless shell whose history and hopes were held back from the outside observer. It all seemed so enticing, but like every other attraction along the world's midway the greatest part of its appeal lay in those moments of anticipation. And after it was all over, the particular attraction which had once promised so much would send you on your way unrewarded, purged of your curiosity and the poorer for being so. This derelict warehouse was, of course, no different.

At least there were no squatters inside that I was called upon to deal with, or none that I saw. And the structure was still fairly safe and solid, with steel stairways that hadn't come loose from their walls, allowing me to make a quick reconnaissance of the place from bottom to top. Aside from the usual array of refuse and junkyard leavings—liquor bottles, worn-out tires, parts of machines, parts of appliances, parts of parts—I did find a filing cabinet in a room on the uppermost floor of the warehouse. Within that cabinet's drawers there were a few pages from a receipt pad that bore the ink-stamped imprint of Murphy's Costumes and Theatrical Supplies, a business that evidently stored some of its eponymous inventory in the warehouse. After further investigation I found some items lying in the dirt and darkness of a shattered wall. These were: (1) a couple of mannikin hands, both lefties, and (2) a very dirty pair of oversized gloves, each with a set of *four* sausage-shaped fingers—the

accurate but strangely impractical accoutrements for the outfitting of both amateurs and professionals called upon to impersonate a beloved and begloved cartoon star. How mysterious, how ridiculous, that my dreaming brain would discard the dismembered mannikin hands, which I found intriguing enough to take back home with me, and decide to feature in my nightmare about Richard those unnaturally large gloves, which I left behind as lesser mementos of that disappointing warehouse excursion.

Walking back to my apartment, I passed through the many shadows cast by great hotels, movie theaters, department stores, and office towers, each of them once filled to capacity with dreams of a future that abandoned them all with an unforeseen haste, leaving behind only untended monuments in a cemetery that no one bothered to visit any more—with the exception of the odd photographer of ruins. Twilight shone through the spaces between these structures and illuminated their soaring peaks with an amber light, the hue of setting suns and fading worlds.

The particular night that followed would have one hour removed from it, as the time zone in which I lived had 'daylight savings' forced upon it, which for me only meant that I would spend the rest of that spring, all of summer, and five weeks of fall trying to recover a lost hour of sleep. This scheme for *saving daylight*—for creating the illusion that we could manipulate the clockwork movements of our solar system—was once justified to me as being 'good for business'. Before returning to my apartment, I stopped by the Metro Diner to put this matter before—

Lillian

‘Good for *business*?’ she repeated with the emphasis of a skeptic. ‘That's news to this old gal. You see anyone else besides you sitting at my counter?’ (Lillian commonly referred to the diner as a whole with the synecdoche of ‘her counter’.) ‘You think another hour of sunshine is going to make any difference to me? Maybe it does to other folks, I don't know.’

As Lillian was talking to me she was staring at the two mannikin hands that I had set down on the stool next to me. She reached under the counter and produced one of the brown bags that the diner used to package carry-out orders. ‘Would you do me the favor of putting those nasty things where I can't see them,’ she said, handing me the bag.

‘Sorry, Lil,’ I said as I stuffed the plaster hands inside the bag and crumpled it closed. But I wasn't sure if my apology was for thoughtlessly bringing these unclean objects into Lillian's otherwise well-scrubbed place of business or if the sight of these replicant parts of the human body somehow unsettled her. I suspected it was the latter, but I didn't pursue the issue.

‘You still taking pictures of those old buildings and junk for your book?’ Lillian asked.

‘Mm-hm,’ I wordlessly replied, turning away to look out the front window of the diner. I found it difficult, almost painful, to perpetuate the lie of ‘my book’ to Lillian. But what could I say to her? That I'm drawn to those old buildings and junk because (voice beginning to seethe)… because they take me into a world (the seething builds)… a world that is the exact opposite of the one (voice seething to a pitch)… the one I'm doomed by my own weakness and fear to live in (uncontrollable, meta-maniacal seething)… to live

in during my weeks, my months, my years and years of work... work... work?

'I don't understand it,' she said. 'There's so many pretty things you could be taking pictures of. Far as that goes, I still don't know why you live upstairs—not saying I ain't glad to have a regular-paying tenant. But even I live in a better neighborhood. And *you* could live anywhere you want.'

'What can I say, Lil? I am addicted to your cooking. Speaking of which, could I get the meatloaf special before you close for the day?'

'Sure can,' Lillian replied as she lit up a cigarette. 'You hear that, Rudy?'

'Yeah, I heard,' the voice of Rudy called out.

As she poured out two cups of coffee (decaf for me, as she already knew), I wondered if Lillian's employees feared her in the way that I feared Richard. After all, one business is essentially the same as another, and she was the owner, CEO, and sole stockholder of that longstanding enterprise called the Metro Diner. I judged her to be easily as tough as Richard, and, in her own world, just as savvy. Was I now trading pleasantries with an elderly black woman who beneath the surface was no different from Richard the Bastard, Richard the Evil One? I liked Lillian, but I knew her only from the perspective of the customer, which made me just a little current in that river of cash that she needed to keep flowing into her accounts.

'You going to just stare at that coffee?' Lillian asked.

I smiled at being caught in an unguarded state of preoccupation with my dark thoughts. Then I took a sip of the decaf.

'It's good. Tastes like the real thing,' I said, and this time I was telling the truth.

‘Nothing hard about making a good cup of coffee,’ Lillian said to this customer as she lit up another cigarette.

And that statement provided something of an answer to my questions about Lillian and her business. Because the coffee at the Metro Diner didn't have to be as good as it was, nor did the excellent food served there have to be so carefully prepared or so reasonably priced. That was not how we did things where I happened to work. The company that employed me strived only to serve up the cheapest fare that its customers would tolerate, churn it out as fast as possible, and charge as much as they could get away with. If it were possible to do so, the company would sell what all businesses of its kind dream about selling, creating that which all our efforts were tacitly supposed to achieve: the ultimate product—Nothing. And for this product they would command the ultimate price—Everything.

This *market strategy* would then go on until one day, among the world-wide ruins of derelict factories and warehouses and office buildings, there stood only a single, shining, windowless structure with no entrance and no exit. Inside would be—will be—only a dense network of computers calculating profits. Outside will be tribes of savage vagrants with no comprehension of the nature or purpose of the shining, windowless structure. Perhaps they will worship it as a god. Perhaps they will try to destroy it, their primitive armory proving wholly ineffectual against the smooth and impervious walls of the structure, upon which not even a scratch can be inflicted.

I spent most of my days in a world devoted to turning this fable into a reality, I knew that. I also knew that the Metro Diner did *n*ot exist in that world, that somehow it was loc-

ated in another place altogether, a zone where the daylight really had been saved, even if it was fast running out. That was why I liked Lillian; that was why I lived in the apartment above her diner. And that, alas, was why I began dreaming about The Doctor who reached with his puffy, four-fingered gloves into the cages and tanks of animals, of living merchandise, in a dimestore pet shop.

Monday morning I awoke before dawn, shaking from the effects of another of these dreams.

'He has special gloves for fixing them,' I mumbled with dream-horror. 'He can go inside with his gloves.'

Even then he was already inside me, just as he had been inside so many others before... fixing them, fixing and fixing, fixing until—in one way or another—they broke.

7

All right, then!

But I didn't have the opportunity to hear Richard speak these words that Monday. When I entered the room where I and The Seven gathered according to a weekly schedule, where we sat in the dried-up leather of enormous chairs at a scarred-up banquet table, our little voices droning amid great dim spaces decorated in a Victorian Gothic style, I saw that the meeting was already in progress.

'Look who decided to join us,' Richard bellowed as I closed the heavy and intricately carved door of the room behind me. 'Glad you could make it, Mr Domino.'

I glanced at my watch, which I had had the habit of obsessively monitoring for as long as I could remember. I had not arrived late to the meeting. 'I didn't know the time of

the meeting had been pushed back,' I said as I took my seat, everyone else staring at me in silence.

'Is it "pushed back" or "moved forward"?' Richard asked rhetorically... and disingenuously. 'I can never keep those straight.'

'It's pushed back, I'm pretty sure,' said Sherry, giving the answer to a question that she didn't realize needed none.

'Well, in plain English, the time of the meeting was changed,' said Richard, shifting back to his usual voice of bland authority. 'You should read your messages, Domino.'

'I did. There was no message about—'

'Actually, Richard,' interrupted Kerrie, 'I didn't want to risk someone not showing up on time because they didn't read their messages promptly, so I went around and personally told everyone... including Frank.'

It made sense that Kerrie the Framer of Innocent Persons for Stealing Her Lousy Stamps would have the job of insuring that I arrived late to the meeting. There was no point in contradicting her. She could lie far better than I could tell the truth. But that wasn't what worried me at the moment. The greater issue was that The Seven had held a secret meeting before the real meeting. And I would never know what was on that other meeting's agenda.

'Well, never mind that now,' said Richard as though he were giving me a reprieve. 'We've wasted enough time on this already. Let's just move on to the usual reports and rigmarole. I'll bring Frank up to speed on the rest of it later.'

It was another full hour before the meeting ended. By that time everyone had drained to the dregs their two-liter-sized bottles of water, their waxy containers of fruit juice, and their volcano-shaped cups of coffee, tea, or who knows

what. (I could still feel the single cup of decaf I'd consumed with breakfast at the Metro Diner sloshing around inside me.) Even Richard had upended his tall thermos of coffee, shaking it over his mug to get at those refractory few drops at the bottom. That was something I had never seen before, which led me to wonder how long the rest of them had been in conference before I arrived. Of course no mention was made of my new product idea, my special plan. That whole matter had entered a realm of gamesmanship that now concerned only Richard and me, and had nothing at all to do with the company… or with my original intentions to reaffirm my unity with The Seven Swine.

After the meeting concluded, the other six supervisors gathered up their ringed scheduling books along with their cups, bottles, and waxy boxes, and filed out of the room in total silence, leaving me and Richard sitting some distance away from each other at that long banquet table. Richard was still shuffling some papers around and scribbling in his own scheduling book, or rather *books*, plural, while I waited anxiously for him to 'bring me up to speed'. He reigned supreme when it came to the art of the torturous stall, creating the sense of a waiting period that might just trail off into eternity. Then, suddenly, he arranged his papers in a neat stack, slammed both of his notebooks closed, and looked down the table at Domino, who was rolling his pencil back and forth in an attempt to appear calm and casual, even bored. But I botched it, because as soon as Richard was ready to talk I brought that pencil-rolling to an instant halt and jerked my neck around to face the man at the head of the table.

‘This is how it is, Frank,’ he began. ‘There's going to be a few changes, sort of a shifting around. Barry's going to be leaving our little group in order to head up a committee to come up with a proposal for the new restructuring of the company, which we all knew was coming. It's Barry's wish that you also serve on this committee—quite a compliment, I would say, considering the source. Now this is only a temporary arrangement, but it's going to be a full-time job. You, Barry, and several others to be named later will need to fully draft your proposal by midsummer. This timetable comes straight from the crowd upstairs. They want to see the new restructuring in place by year's end.’

‘Can I ask the purpose of the new restructuring?’

‘You know. It's the same theme as the last restructuring. I mean, sweet Jesus, how many variations can there be on cheaper, faster, and... that other thing?’ Richard was as skilled as ever in privately sharing his very genuine cynicism in order to create the false sense that he was really on your side. ‘But if I were you, I wouldn't bring up questions like that in front of the others on the committee. Just follow Barry's lead. He knows what's what with these things.’

‘And what happens in the meantime, while Barry and I are serving full-time on this committee?’

‘Mary's going to take over the day-to-day supervision of Barry's department, in addition to her own. And Kerrie will do the same thing with respect to your people. She knows quite a bit about that new software being tested in your department. It's only a temporary arrangement. I don't foresee any bumps along the way. Do you?’

‘None at all,’ I agreed, not bothering to bring up Kerrie's militaristic style of management, her burgeoning psychosis,

and her all-round demonic nature.

For the next few months I served—under Barry—on the restructuring committee, trying to make sense of his concepts for a company-wide reorganization and wearily accepting the successive editions of what he called The Master Chart, which even in its earliest stages resembled a more densely wrought and diabolical version of Dante's map of Hell. Barry handed out these revised charts to the rest of us almost on a daily basis. Each one contained some infinitesimal modification or addition to the one before it, until the pages outlining his brainchild of restructuralization were almost black with boxes filled with tiny letters that had arrows pointing upward, downward, and sideways to other boxes filled with tiny letters. I never read any of the words—at least I assumed they were words—formed by those tiny letters, which grew tinier and tinier as the boxes became increasingly more numerous and the arrows (the arrows!) ultimately pointed in every direction. Finally the deadline arrived for the committee to turn over its proposal to the greater powers whose offices occupied the twentieth (twenty-first?) floor of the pre-Depression-era building in which the company was located... until the time would come for it to relocate to a suburban locale far from the taxes of the city's downtown area. Now I could return to my old job as a department supervisor—right?

Wrong: Because under Kerrie's management two of my old staff had transferred to another division, two had left the company, and two had been fired.

Wrong: Because Kerrie had her staff, ‘Kerrie's Special Forces’ she called them, doing all the work once done by both my staff and hers.

(Barry didn't return as the supervisor of his old department either, but that was the way things were supposed to work out. He would start working on Phase Two of the company-wide restructuring, while his staff was integrated with Kerrie's Special Forces. Two understaffed departments were now doing the work of three that had been fully staffed. If I had only paid closer attention to Barry's charts I might have noticed that this merging of ‘work cells’ was part of the company's restructuring.)

And wrong again: Because I had been given a new role in the company's puppet show, and Richard was pulling the strings with the four, surgically dexterous, fingers of his great gloved hands.

8

By the end of the summer I was sitting in one of Barry's tiny square boxes in a corner of the company far removed from where I had been just a few months before. My coworkers were now temporary help, college co-ops, and persons who possessed the ability to spend every workday with their eyes positioned eighteen inches from a glaring _____ screen, their fingertips in constant motion across their keyboards, a never-diminishing pile of pages stacked on the desk counter beside them.

On the rare occasions that I ran into one of The Seven—perhaps in a lavatory, perhaps in a hallway—they never failed to greet me with the sweetest smiles and concerned inquiries into ‘how I was doing’.

‘Just fine,’ I replied, although my unsmiling face and dead voice gave me away to The Victorious Seven, who were on the side of righteousness, the rule of corporate law, and

Richard. Speaking of whom, I should record the fact that every so often I still received messages from him asking about my new-product idea and suggesting that perhaps the time was nigh for the company to make some riskier moves. Was he serious? I didn't know. Did he want to use the complete documentation of my idea, my special plan, to undermine my status in the company even further than he already had? Or was there some other reason altogether that he kept up communications with me on this subject? I didn't know, I didn't know. But I did know one thing: no good could come of giving Richard what he wanted from me. He would never, ever see the full documentation of my idea, because it was now in a very safe place. And withholding what Richard wanted did give me some minuscule satisfaction that mitigated, however slightly, what I had endured at the hands of The Seven.

So why did I stand for such treatment? Why didn't I leave the company? Why didn't I do any of a dozen things that I had contemplated doing for many years?

At the time there was only one answer to these questions. The Doctor had gone inside me, and with his gloved hands he had fixed me and fixed me good. Did I mention that I suffered from Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder?

Even for a person of average emotional stability the lust for revenge can be quite a time-consuming affair. For me it was all-consuming. It shoved aside every other thought that got in its way, every fantasy and feeling that might have led me back to my former self, every memory of who or what I had ever been. My nights and weekends were now taken over by a set of constantly recycled scenarios in which Domino had his day. And that day was soaked in bathtubs of

blood, a day of judgment overseen by a never-setting sun that burned madly red against a black sky.

But I had always been weak, and, as I think I might also have mentioned, I had always been afraid. So Domino would tough it out, Domino would hang in there, Domino would lay low until… until… until *what* I had no idea. Until…

One night I was preparing to leave work, putting away my ID badge, shutting down that staring square of the _____, etc. And, obsessive-compulsive that I am, I had gotten into the habit of placing a page from a legal pad on top of my pile of unentered data, a page on which I had written 'WORK NOT DONE', just in the unlikely event, just on the remotest chance, that someone from the cleaning staff, or who-knows-who, might see this pile of data as the wastepaper which, in fact, it could justly be mistaken for. No one else among my coworkers, it goes without saying, ever took such precautions. I, on the other hand, could not maintain that puny part of serenity that I still enjoyed without doing so.

But when I arrived at my desk the next morning, my WORK NOT DONE note, along with the whole pile of unentered data it covered, was gone, nowhere to be found, disappeared. I reported the missing materials to my supervisor, who, strangely enough, did not seem in the least concerned with its whereabouts.

'What really concerns me, Frank,' said this boy who a year before had not even heard of the company in which he now held the post of supervisor, 'that is, my primary concern, is your overall performance, both in this department and in the company as a whole. You're the least productive employee in the department, for one thing. And I've been

looking at your file from Human Resources. It's kind of ugly, if you want to know the truth. Forget that you've never really been a team player, at least according to the evaluations you've gotten from your former manager. There's also stuff here about theft from other employees, mismanaging your department when you were a supervisor, not carrying your weight when you served on the restructuring committee, sexual harassment, an overall lacksa—lackadais—a bad attitude. It's your whole profile that's the problem. I've tried to cut you some slack around here because I know you've been with the company for a long time. But you're just dead weight these days. This so-called disappearance of your work—I don't know what to make of *that*. Someone's going to have to go to a lot of trouble to regenerate that data. I'm thinking that maybe that's what you wanted.'

After continuing in this vein for a while longer, my punk of a supervisor gave me the option of resigning from the company, which I did immediately. I didn't want to, I really didn't. But there was no other choice. I knew who was behind this business, and I didn't stand a chance against him.

Before I cleaned out my desk—which was not a big deal since the only personal possessions I now kept at work were some packages of cookies—and before I turned in my letter of resignation (Why letter? Why not statement... or declaration?), I stopped by the men's room and simply stood before the large mirror, staring at the image of someone who was staring back at me.

He was of average height and build, average weight, average age, with hair neither long nor short. He was cleanshaven. He wore corrective lenses with a slight amber tint. His eyes were brown.

‘All right, then,’ he said to the image in the mirror. Then he turned and walked out of the room.

9

Cheap clothes stores, cheap electronics stores, liquor-lotto-and-checks-cashed-here stores, wig shops, pawn shops, gun shops... gun shops... gun shops.

There was a particular gun shop that I walked by every day on my route to and from my job. It was a small building and never appeared to be open for business. I had never been in a gun shop before, but I walked into this one as if I were a regular customer. Looking around I felt the same excitement I'd known as a kid when I visited the local dimestore to run my eyes over the colorful boxes of model cars, the battery-operated robots, the squirt guns, the cap guns, the cowboy guns, the tommy guns.

‘What can I do for you?’ asked the bearded little man, almost a dwarf, who emerged from a back room. I must not have answered him, because he repeated his question. Then he said, ‘Are you looking to buy a firearm?’

‘Yes, sir,’ I said emphatically. ‘Indeed I am.’

‘Something for personal protection?’ asked the bearded little man.

‘Actually,’ I said, ‘I'm here for a dual purpose. *Personal* protection is in fact an issue. You see, the neighborhood where I live isn't as safe as it might be.’

‘I hear you,’ interjected the bearded man who seemed to have lost about an inch in height since he first appeared.

‘Yes, well, that's the first part of my mission. The second is that I'm here to do some early Christmas shopping. I have some friends, seven of them to be exact. And this year I'd

like to present them with the gift, as you say, of personal protection.'

'I've done the same myself.'

'Really,' I said, noticing that the gun-shop dwarf had definitely shrunk another half inch or so. 'Now I have to admit that I'm not very familiar with all the varieties of handguns—you have quite a lot of them here.'

'Best selection in the downtown area.'

'That's terrific. Then show me what you've got. I'm very much open to suggestions.'

But the dwarf had disappeared entirely from sight. Then I saw that he had only been squatting down with his head inside the glass counter that stood between us. When he stood up—no bigger than before and perhaps even a bit more shrunken—he held out a handgun that looked absolutely gargantuan in his puny palm.

'Go ahead—hold it.'

I did.

'It's a Glock,' he said.

'I've heard of these from television shows,' I said, amazed at how wonderful it felt in my hand. I pointed it toward the wall and looked down the barrel. Tears almost came to my eyes. In the background of my elation the dwarf spoke of the weapon's reliability... its accuracy... its magazine capacity!

'I'm sold. I'll take two of these—one for myself and one for my friend Barry. What else have you got?'

The dwarf began rushing around. He was now so close to the floor that I had to look over the counter to see him. He showed me Rugers, he showed me Mausers, he showed me Smiths, Brownings, and Berettas. And then he showed me a Firestar.

‘Compact, nice weight. You could carry it around in your jacket and not even know it was there. Has a seven-round capacity.’

‘Seven,’ I repeated. And in the next breath put it on my shopping list for Sherry. ‘It should fit perfectly into a woman's purse, wouldn't you say?’

‘I suppose. If the purse wasn't one of those tiny things.’

After seeing a few more makes and models of handguns on which I had to pass, feeling myself an expert at this stage, the dwarf brought forth a USP Tactical.

‘Forty-five automatic. Five-inch barrel for superior accuracy. A real special forces weapon.’

‘Did you say “special forces”?’ I said.

He did.

‘Do you have a couple of them in stock?’

He did, a blessing on his dwarfish head.

That left two more to complete my arsenal. And I knew just what I wanted. Their barrel lengths, it turned out, were only one inch and seven-eighths.

‘Uncle Mike's Boot, they're called,’ said the dwarf. ‘Fits right into an ankle holster, just like you said you wanted.’

‘And do you have such holsters readily available?’ I asked.

‘I can get them by the time the legal paperwork goes through on this merchandise.’

‘Do the holsters come in black?’ I asked.

‘I can check. Do you want holsters for the rest?’

‘Yes, I do. And make sure there's one left-side holster for my lefty friend Perry.’

The truth was that, among my other unusual traits, I was ambidexterous. And the cinematic image of a vengeful figure

pulling out pistols with both hands at once suddenly flickered brightly in my brain.

'Holsters are important for safety reasons,' squeaked a voice from the shadows of the floor. 'I've also got the kind that clip onto your belt.'

'That's exactly what I was thinking,' I said as I laid my credit card down on the counter and began filling out the registration forms. 'By the way, is there possibly a place in the nearby area where I could get some instruction in the proper use of firearms?'

It so happened there was. So my schedule was set. I could pick the guns up on Friday and then spend some time working on my weapons technique. By Monday morning I would be ready.

As I was filling out the last of the registration forms I happened to glance at another section of the counter where a shining array of outdoor knives was laid out. One in particular caught my eye.

'Thirteen-inch Buck Skinner Hunting Knife,' the dwarf informed me.

'That is excellent,' I gasped, trying my hardest not to weep with gratitude at the magnificence of this implement.

Farewell to the humble charms of *wabi*, the morose pleasures of *sabi*. Greetings to the potent joy of cold-forged steel... to the harsh intoxications of temperature-resistant polymer components... and a special hello to pure ballistic stopping power.

'Your credit card is really taking a pounding today,' said the bearded little man, who had returned to his previous height.

‘Oh, that's all right,’ I said, picking up my bag containing my leather-sheathed Buck Skinner Hunting Knife. I had already made my last payment to those bloodsuckers who had issued me that particular piece of plastic, I thought as I stepped out of the gun shop and into the sunshine of a brilliant October afternoon. But I had a busy day ahead, and no time to waste.

10

I skipped lunch and went directly to the only halfway decent men's clothiers with a franchise still located downtown. There was a metal plaque flanking the entrance to the store which told me that the clothes company had been founded the same year that young Mary Shelley published the first edition of her novel *Frankenstein* (1818). What a glad coincidence that I happened to be looking for an outfit in the gothic style.

I purchased one light and loose-fitting raincoat (color: black), one mock turtleneck that was made mostly of Italian Merino wool (color: black), one pair of black denim pants that fit nicely over a pair of black leather boots and provided plenty of room to secrete those boot guns named for good old Uncle Mike. (And those holsters better be black, I thought.) I was wearing my new clothes when I walked out of the store, having abandoned my old ones in the dressing room. I asked to keep the box for the boots, since I would need it when I proceeded directly to my bank in order to empty my savings account.

‘May I ask why you've decided to close your account with us?’ asked the gray-suited man to whom the teller had sent

me. He was sitting behind a desk in a corner of the great vaulted lobby of the bank.

'Because I despise you,' I replied, looking at him straight in the eye from behind amber-tinted eyeglasses.

'I beg your pardon?'

'I think you heard me. This is a bank. I'd rather carry my money around in my crotch than have it serve the purposes of this institution for another minute.'

The banker, somewhat petulantly, retrieved three forms from the top drawer of his desk and asked me to fill them out. Two of the forms he kept. The third he told me to take to the teller who had sent me to him. 'This is a waiver. You understand that the bank can't be held responsible for cash withdrawals once you've taken possession of your funds. Even while you're still on the bank's premises, our security guards will not be available for your protection.' As I rose to go back to the teller's window and have all my money loaded into the shoe box I had brought with me, the gray-suited man added, 'We *sincerely* have enjoyed serving you and hope to do so again in the future.' It occurred to me that all civilization was structured so that such people could make snide remarks like that and get away with it. They had been getting away with it for thousands of years and would continue to get away with it until the end of time.

After cashing out at the bank, I took the shoe box back to my apartment and wrapped it securely with packing tape. Then with a felt-tip pen I wrote across the top: 'For Lillian Hayes. Thank you.' I signed my name underneath these words, along with the day's date. Then I placed the box on my desk between my computing machine and printer.

Yes: I did own such a machine, despite the maledictions I routinely heaped upon them. (I told Richard I had worked on my new-product idea at home, and that was the truth. I only lied about having any part of it in hand-written form.)

No: I wasn't going to take an ax or a baseball bat to it.

Yes: I did plan to take an ax or a baseball bat to it when the time came.

But until then I still had use for it. Before I did what I was going to do, I needed to make a statement, because I had no intention of being around for questioning when the smoke cleared. And there were definite issues that needed to be addressed.

First: *The question of insanity*. This would certainly be a discourse that would eat up quite a few pages. However ludicrous it now sounds to me, at the time I was quite concerned that in the aftermath of things I would not be dismissed as just another kook. A loner who took pictures of ruined places in his spare time. A burned-out weirdo. A guy who couldn't take the pressure and who finally 'snapped' like so many others before him. Even worse—to be perceived as a psychological casualty of *the times*, as if there were something special about any period, any place in which a particular body chanced to find itself in motion. I must have been crazy to have thought I could talk my way out of that one!

Second: *The issue of evil*. For many years, as I ran my mind's eye over the tiny print of the innumerable pages of history… or contemplated some great (or not so great) atrocity reported by the nightly news, I always said to myself: 'Better to be the one who is executed than the one who performs the execution.' I knew that I would have to come up

with some fancy reasoning to maneuver myself from that position of armchair rectitude to a pile of bullet-shredded bodies, even if the last one on the heap was my own. Many, many words would have to be processed and many pages printed out to explicate such a dramatic moral turnaround. Or so it seemed to me as I walked the floor of my apartment, tapping out a rhythm on my black-denim-clad leg with the blade of my Buck Skinner Hunting Knife.

Third (and last): *The problem of polemics*. There was no way in the world that I wanted to be caught in a state of naked self-justification for what would undoubtedly be seen as an act of egregious overkill. After all, what crimes had been committed by The Seven to deserve such a judgment, and who was I to carry out that judgment with such severity… and with such style? Well, like it or not, there are no rules in these matters—only impulses, the exercise of power, and a convenient time and place (motive, means, and opportunity in the squinty eyes of the Law).

> Question: Were there no other options that might have been less violently explored?
>
> Answer: None that presented themselves to my obsessive-compulsive brain.
>
> Question: Couldn't I have sought professional aid to control my mania?
>
> Answer: I had already swallowed a candy store of medications without appreciable results (except a constant cramp in my gut). And I had undergone a kaleidoscope of therapies which were not any more

effective than the meds, although at least they didn't affect my digestive system.

Question (reprise): Wasn't there *some* other course of action I might have pursued?

Answer: If there had been, I would have; since I didn't, there wasn't.

So those were the matters that occupied my mind, along with a lot of other nonsense, as I made my final outing of the day to an office supply store. I would certainly need to buy plenty of paper and some extra cartridges of toner in order to bring forth an adequate declaration, an ultimate statement, of all the facts... my letter of resignation from the human race.

At the check-out counter my credit card finally breathed its last, and when I left the store I tossed it in the nearest trash container. Then it occurred to me that I wouldn't be needing any of the other documents I had collected in my wallet over the years, and so I tossed all of that junk away too, along with the wallet itself—that battered old pal of my back pocket. Freed of these encumbrances of official identity, I practically soared like a huge black crow through the October twilight back to my apartment.

Nonetheless, my mind was still spinning about, fretting over the precise form and phrasing of my Ultimate Statement. It seemed to me that there remained some issue that I had yet to face, some vague but fundamental question I had not regarded, some abysmal matter that I still could not approach, that possibly no human brain had ever approached.

Of course the simple answer to everything I was about to do was that I felt myself trapped in a maze of pain, and the only course of action that presented itself to my mortal faculties was to shoot my way out. I could always fall back on that as my closing line.

However, all of this mental exercise came to a skidding halt when I realized that, due to my state of distraction, I had left my goods back at the office supply store... and it was almost closing time. Spinning around on the sidewalk, I began racing back toward my point of purchase. But something happened that kept me from ever reaching that destination.

When it happened: I couldn't say.

Where it happened: I couldn't say.

What it was: That I could say.

It was the loudest sound I had ever heard in my life.

Part II

1

There was only darkness. It flowed like a black river that had no bottom. And it was unconfined by any shores, infinite and turbulent and moving without direction, without any source or destination. There was only darkness flowing in darkness.

Then something felt itself struggling in this black and bottomless and infinite river, something unformed and embryonic swirling within the darkness. It had no eyes, just as the darkness had none. It had no thoughts and no sensations, only the darkness flowing through it and around it in a blind chaos of thrashing agitation. It was something living, something restless and alive in the darkness that flowed relentlessly like a black river in a black world. Yet even without eyes or thoughts or sensations it moved toward the impossible surface of the darkness… and broke through.

I had always been afraid of the dark. Now it was all around me, a vicious and sinister presence without shape or name. And it was also inside me, so that I could not escape it by any means of flight and was paralyzed with fear. But slowly it began to withdraw—that nameless darkness, that vicious and sinister presence which is encountered only in the worst nightmares—hiding itself away once again and allowing forms to appear as if in a dull moonlight, letting in those thoughts and sensations required for the creation of a self. And as if I had been dreaming, it seemed that I had been gone forever. And as if I had been dreaming, it seemed I had been gone for no time at all.

It was night, and I was in my apartment above Lillian's diner. (How had I gotten there? Where was I before the darkness blinded my mind?) One certainty: I did not inhabit the space around me in the same way I had before. I could move throughout the rooms of my apartment, yet I did not use or need to use a human form to do so. (How could this be happening? What had been done with my body?) By force of will alone I found myself rising from the floor and floating like a cobweb in a corner of the ceiling. I could see the moonlight beaming through the old curtains of the window by my desk.

Another mystery: I could now see beyond the curtains and through the window into a dizzying maze of rooms and hallways and streets and alleys, my mind spinning in a thousand directions until I was forced to make it stop. Following this exercise, I opened my ears—just for a moment—to an incoherent choir of voices, cutting them off before I became lost in their senseless babble.

There were so many frightening things, so many questions and conundrums during this dream-like phase of an experience that I knew was no dream at all. But any answers were evasive and fled into opaque regions where my mind could not pursue them. Every time I tried to penetrate into these areas I found myself trapped in a dead-end thick with shadows, what I came to think of as ‘dark spots’ where that black river flowed bubbling and viscous. These dark spots were a source of both fear and frustration for me. They suggested the presence of an unknown player in a game I was only beginning to learn.

I was still my same obsessive-compulsive self—that was a further certainty—and I did not like the feeling that schemes

and strategies were being carried out around me… that secret meetings had taken place behind my back… that I had been condemned for something I did not do… that I had been manipulated and humiliated… that my competence had been questioned by buffoons, my messages ignored by morons… that I had been railroaded into the status of a non-person in an organization I had served so long and so well… and ultimately dismissed from even that lick-spittle job.

Work not done! Work not done!

Their faces now crowded everything else from my thoughts. It was my final wish, my very special plan, to see those faces screaming and bloody and finally laid lifeless at my feet—how well I recalled all of *that*. But the Monday-morning ballistic blowout had been cancelled. In my present state I couldn't even hold a piece of paper. (Paper, paper—why did this word echo in my mind for a moment, only to fade and die in the grip of those dark spots?) How then could I wield a head-shattering USP Tactical or a kneecapping Glock 17? I couldn't even see my own face as I hovered before my bathroom mirror. I would never be able to present that face as the last thing those swine would ever see on the day of their slaughter.

And then it happened. The machinery of my murderous rage was grinding its gears, burning its oil into toxic vapors, shooting out sparks right and left, shooting and shooting… until the mirror before me began to glow with an eerie incandescence. There it was, at the center of that infernal aura. There was my face, radiant with obsessive hate. There were my eyes, pitching daggers from behind amber-tinted lenses. There I stood in the full blackness of my form. And in my left hand was my Buck Skinner Hunting Knife. I raised it

up and pressed the side of that blade lightly against my cheek, nearly swooning with a black joy.

After this first manifestation I let myself fade back into the shadows. I now had the ability to control the substance of myself. I would later learn to control the powers of my sight and my hearing. And there were other things, forces and faculties unheard of and marvelous, that I would soon discover.

My work would not be left undone. My work was only beginning.

2

Two homicide detectives—one black, one white, both gray—got off the elevator at an old downtown office building and entered the reception area of a company that was the building's oldest and most prosperous lessee. They noted the soft lighting and expensive decor (with grand piano) but did not seem intimidated in the least. Both of them had visited the old building many times over the years.

As Detective White said to Detective Black in the elevator, ‘There used to be a soda fountain on the ground floor of this place. Best hot-fudge sundaes I ever had in my life. My parents used to take me there when we lived in the city.’

‘Long time ago,’ commented Detective Black.

‘Yup,’ said Detective White with only the vaguest hint of sentimental reflection in his voice.

From the reception area they were shuttled up to the twentieth (twenty-first?) floor, where they were greeted by another receptionist slash administrative assistant who was awaiting their arrival. Marsha Linstrom, according to the brass name-plate on her desk, ushered the homicide detect-

ives into the office of the company's CEO, who had no personal knowledge that could aid them in this police matter but who gave them carte blanche to move about the company offices with the guidance of a woman that Marsha called up from Human Resources. As they began descending the stairway that shot like a spine through the ten floors of the company'soffice space, Marsha Linstrom—a factotum of superior efficiency—was already on the phone instructing someone to find out the ‘where and when’ of the funeral and to order the customary arrangement of flowers which the company always sent on the occasion of an employee's demise.

Down in HR, the homicide detectives asked to see the company's file on the deceased, as well as the files of persons who worked closely with the deceased, along with the files of any employees who had recently left the company ‘not in good standing’. Earlier that day the homicide detectives, to their satisfaction, had determined the friends and family members of the deceased to be poor suspects. An investigation at the victim's workplace was simply the next step in a fairly mechanical process. The two men each took notes based on the information provided by the employee files they examined.

‘Why don't we work this Frank Dominio guy first. Talk to his supervisor,’ said Detective Black.

‘Yeah, I know,’ replied his partner. ‘His file doesn't exactly paint a picture of the ideal employee. And the stigma of a forced resignation can really irk some people.’

‘Sounds like you're speaking from personal experience.’

‘I say it in confidence,’ said Detective White.

‘A guy would have to be incredibly irked to do this thing,’ said Detective Black, producing a manila envelope that he had folded up in the pocket of his overcoat.

‘I guess it depends on the guy.’

But the Young Supervisor with whom the homicide detectives spoke had nothing of interest to add to Frank Dominio's dossier, not wittingly anyway. Mr Dominio hadn't worked very long in the Young Supervisor's department before he handed in his resignation. ‘You should talk to someone who worked with Domino longer than I did. I've only been with the company about a year.’

‘I thought his name was DoMINio,’ said Detective Black.

‘Didn't I say that?’ replied the Young Supervisor, lying arrogantly.

‘No, you said Domino,’ confirmed Detective White.

‘Well, I didn't mean to say that,’ said the Young Supervisor, suddenly repentant. ‘So what did Frank do?’

‘Thank you for your time, Mr Chipmunk,’ said Detective Black.

‘It's Chipman.’

‘My mistake.’

Then the homicide detectives turned and walked to their next, and best, subject of interrogation.

‘Twelfth floor. Richard Somebody,’ said Detective White, glancing at his notes.

‘Mind if we make a pit stop first?’

‘I was about to suggest the same thing.’

In the men's room, which was located outside of company space and still had most of the original fixtures from the time of the building's pre-Depression-era construction, the homicide detectives relieved themselves in surroundings of

massive marble walls, heavy wooden doors fronting spacious toilet stalls, and deep porcelain sinks with separate handles for hot and cold water. The first to zip up, Detective Black strode over to the sink and pulled both handles toward him, cupping his hands under the single spigot. But no water came rushing into his waiting palms, only a great groaning sound that rumbled inside the walls and made the porcelain basin shake before his eyes. He backed away from the sink as his partner looked on. What ultimately emerged from the goose-necked metal spigot was a thick oily fluid, as if the lavatory's plumbing had tapped into a black river of sewage.

'It *is* an old building,' shouted Detective White over the loud rumbling inside the walls, which by now had modulated into a beastlike growl.

'Yeah,' said Detective Black as he cautiously pushed back both the hot and cold handles on the sink, bringing the room back to its former state of weighty silence.

'Come on,' said Detective White. 'We have to see a man about a murder.'

When they arrived at Richard's office it was obvious that he was expecting them. He rose from his desk and vigorously shook hands with the homicide detectives, introducing himself, and then closed the door. He invited his two visitors to seat themselves in the chairs positioned before his desk, and then returned to his own chair behind it.

'What terrible news you bring us,' Richard said. 'I can't believe it. But why wasn't there anything in the media about it?'

'The body was discovered just this morning,' explained Detective Black. 'We kept the news people out of the loop a

little longer than usual on this one because the circumstances of Mr Stokowski's death were somewhat unusual.'

'Unusual? In what way?'

'From the files we examined, you were Mr Stokowski's immediate superior for a period of some years,' said Detective White. 'We were hoping that you or some of the others who worked more closely with the victim might be able to help us in a way that the others we've spoken with have not.'

'I don't understand,' said Richard.

Detective Black opened the manila envelope he'd been carrying around and pulled out some photographs, handing them across the desk to Richard. 'These are photos taken at the crime scene. What they reveal has not been made known to the media.'

Richard leafed through the photographs without any change of facial expression, which must have been difficult even for him, considering the images now passing before his eyes. Detective Black placed these images in context for the benefit of Mr Stokowski's former boss.

'Mr Stokowski's car was found by two officers patrolling the area around the abandoned warehouse you see in the photos. Considering that it was a relatively expensive vehicle and in good condition, they phoned in the license tags to see if it had been reported as stolen.'

'And had it?' asked Richard.

'No,' answered Detective White, picking up the narrative. 'The officers then investigated the warehouse. Almost immediately they came across the victim tied to an old office chair and pushed up against that wall in the pictures.'

'It looks like there's something wrong with his hands,' said Richard.

‘They're not hands,’ said Detective White. ‘Well, they're not real hands. They're from a mannikin—two left hands. Somebody very strong cut off Mr Stokowski's hands—we're still looking for those—and somehow fused the ends of his wrists to those, uh, artificial hands.’

‘It's fairly obvious that the killer wasn't trying to hide his work,’ said Detective Black. ‘He very much wanted the body to be found in that condition and on that exact spot—undisturbed. Do you see the writing on the wall just above the victim's head?’

‘Yes,’ said Richard.

‘The letters,’ said Detective White, ‘seem to have been burned right into the wall, possibly with an acetylene torch. Can you see what it says?’

‘It looks like “Work” or “Word”. “Word Note Gone?” ‘ said Richard.

‘WORK NOT DONE,’ corrected Detective Black. ‘All capital letters. It's written very clearly if you look close.’

‘All right, I see it now,’ admitted Richard. ‘But I still don't understand why you would think that I might be able to shed any light on this… atrocity.’

‘We were hoping that the words, the hands, anything you see here, might mean something to you,’ said Detective White. ‘“Work Not Done” seems a natural enough phrase to be used in one's workplace. Or maybe you recognize the handwriting, although I know that's a long shot.’

‘It surely is. Everything written in all caps looks the same to me,’ said Richard as he arranged the photos into a neat pile and placed them on his desk at a distance from himself. ‘No, I'm sorry—none of it means anything to me.’

‘Well, perhaps you could bring this up—as discreetly as possible—with some of Mr Stokowski's coworkers,’ said one of the homicide detectives as they got up from their seats. ‘See if they can think of something. Just the part about the writing, you understand. We'd like to keep the rest of it out of the media as long as we can.’

Detective Black then collected the photographs and replaced them in the manila envelope. Detective White left a card on Richard's desk with a phone number and a—gack!—email address where the homicide detectives could be reached. Richard began to open the door for the two men, but then pushed it closed again.

‘If I might ask,’ Richard said. ‘You never specified what was the cause of death. I suppose it was the hands. The trauma, the bleeding.’

Detective White smiled and said, ‘The verdict's not in on that one. Most likely it was the hands.’

‘Most likely,’ repeated Detective Black.

Then, for just a moment, Richard became as still as stone. He knew they were lying to him, but all he could do was express his sincere hope that they would soon apprehend the killer, adding, almost in a whisper, ‘Perry was a very well-liked employee at this company.’

‘I'm sure he was,’ said Detective Black, who then casually flipped through a few pages in his notebook. Then, almost as an afterthought, he said, ‘And this Domino guy—I gather that he wasn't one of the most popular people around here.’

‘Excuse me?’ said Richard the Innocent.

‘Frank Dominio,’ said Detective White, just to clarify the identity of the employee in question.

‘Oh, yes,’ responded Richard without a hint of commitment to any knowledge regarding Mr Dominio.

‘We understand that he wasn't exactly a model employee,’ said Detective Black. ‘Mr Chipman said that you were the person to talk to about this guy. He resigned from the company yesterday?’

‘I didn't know that,’ said Richard. ‘Well, as you already seem to know, he wasn't the sort who was going to be named employee of the month. It's true that he worked under me for some time, but… you know how it is. Some people don't make much of an impression on you. And I've seen so many come and go.’

‘So Mr Dominio was just another guy who went,’ said Detective Black.

‘As far as I know,’ said my old boss.

Now it was Richard's turn to see his interrogators turn into rock-solid doubters of his word. So how did it feel, Richard—to be left standing there as Detectives White and Black left your office knowing—*knowing*—that you had lied to them? Lied, Richard, and not to just somebody around the office, but to a couple of homicide detectives.

How well you must have known that they knew there was something wrong about you. So how did it feel?

3

I had always been easily moved to feel affection or admiration for people whom I viewed only from afar. And this is how I felt toward Detectives White and Black as I spied on them from the remote observatory of my apartment, tuning in their voices and images on my personal airwaves, keeping myself at a spectral distance from the eyes and ears of these

law enforcement veterans. They seemed very good at what they did, very dedicated and phlegmatic in a way that suited men of their age who had seen the things they must have seen in their professional lives—the corpse of Perry Stokowski for instance—and who knew what to say and what not to say to the people, or swine, they were forced to deal with on a daily basis. I almost felt guilty that they had no hope of achieving a successful conclusion to the case they were presently working.

But how I appreciated Detective White's memory of those hot-fudge sundaes he had enjoyed in the building where I once worked, not to mention the way Detective Black handled Supervisor Chipman when that little crumb knowingly corrupted my surname. But that one little word, Domino, wasn't going to help those admirable and affection-worthy homicide detectives. They would still be looking at it from a thousand angles when they ultimately declared the case, still in its infancy, unsolved.

And best of all was Richard's stony look of visibly repressed frustration when Detectives White and Black had so transparently lied to him in claiming that the cause of Mr Stokowski's death was unknown at the present time. I thought I even saw a genuine flinch of fear in Richard's face. (As sweet to me as one of those hot-fudge sundaes of Detective White's childhood.) Of course it would not have been possible, and certainly not desirable, to reveal the bizarre truth of this aspect of the case. Then they would really be taken for liars, or possibly lunatics.

In the photos they had shown Richard, Perry's head was slumped crookedly downward in fine corpse-like fashion. Anyone could see that he was still wearing his eyeglasses, I

made sure of that. But what couldn't be seen was that the red-tinted lenses were almost entirely gone. Little trace of them was found at the crime scene—only a broken sliver of the left lens that remained in those thick black frames. It wasn't until an autopsy had been performed, a show that I attended ‘in person’, that the coroner found the pulverized pieces of Perry's lenses jaggedly embedded throughout the cadaver's system. The redly tinted shrapnel had torn up the victim's veins and arteries, were jammed jaggedly into the inner walls of his intestines, and had collected into a tough little cluster—like a glass raspberry—in his aorta. ‘I don't get it. How did this stuff get in here?’ queried the coroner. ‘It's as if someone injected it into his system.’

Close enough, doctor. I deliberately left that sliver of red lens in Perry's glasses so that the comparison could be made with the splinters that flowed along the red river inside him and ripped him apart from within. Red goes into red. It made sense to me. Then again, I was insane, a monster, an inhuman malefactor with no good excuse for its abominable actions.

One would think, as you are probably thinking, that someone who was no longer among the living might have risen above his earthly rage, might have gained enough perspective to withdraw from the petty games that had once pinned his body to the world. But there was really no way to be sure that in fact I was no longer among the living. Even though I did not ‘live’ in the usual sense of the word—example: I no longer suffered from bodily needs such as hunger, thirst, or sleep—there remained a definite material aspect to my existence.

Perry certainly considered me a physical threat when he first saw me in the rearview mirror of his car as he drove away from the Straight Ahead jazz club that night. When I put my Buck Skinner Hunting Knife to his throat he felt the blade… he started begging and sniveling… and he heard my voice instruct him where to steer his jazzy little vehicle. And afterward I walked out of that derelict warehouse, alone, the way I had come in with Perry, which was the same entrance I had used on that day I visited the abandoned structure and discovered those mannikin hands and cartoon-character gloves. I wiped Perry's blood off the knife and onto the right leg of my black denim pants. I noted with annoyance that it was darker than it ought to have been at that hour of the morning due to the 'daylight savings' time-change.

Indeed, following my execution of Perry it appeared to be far darker than it ought to have been, even considering that hour which was annually excised for several months from the time zone I inhabited. It looked to me, as I stood in the moonlight of the empty field beside the warehouse, that there was a blackness behind the blackness of the black sky, some constellation of 'black spots', like stars in negative photographic exposure, which collected above me and which I felt only I could see. But although this blackness, in my perception, did seem to describe a kind of constellation far off in the galaxy overhead, I also sensed in the most intimate way that it was connected to that fearsome *presence* I had encountered so recently.

On the way back to my apartment this formation of dark stars, along with the fear that accompanied them, faded away to a large extent. Yet even as morning broke there still remained some residue, in my peculiar vision, of those dark

spots... leaving a kind of stain upon the sky, a dirty smear that never entirely dissipated. No mention was made of this phenomenon by the local weather reports, which I was able to check and recheck quite thoroughly using my newly gained powers of surveillance. Somehow I knew that these dark spots of the night, these stains upon the daytime sky, were not visible to any living persons.

Yet I still did not believe myself to be dead. This conviction didn't merely derive from the fact that I had been a lifelong non-believer in an afterlife—I was always willing to concede my errors of opinion when sufficient evidence arose to the contrary. But no evidence of the kind presented itself, no matter how hard I searched for it. No newspaper obituary —those little boxes with tiny letters inside—had reported the death of Francis Vincent Dominio. My name appeared nowhere in any of the official records that I scanned in my own fashion. Thus, I had to conclude that I was *not dead*, even if I was obviously no longer among the living.

This situation might have been a great problem for me if I had not been so preoccupied with other business. I still had some special plans to make. And I also knew that it wouldn't be long before Detectives White and Black followed up on their information concerning a bad apple who had 'hereby resign[ed] effective immediately' from the company where Mr Stokowski had until recently been employed and who, now that the homicide detectives finally noticed it, had worked closely with the deceased for a number of years.

White and Black would soon be asking Lillian about the tenant in the apartment above the Metro Diner. Before that happened, I needed to get some of my affairs in order.

‘Hello, idiot.’

The voice was Richard's and the person addressed was Supervisor Chipman.

‘What did you say to them?’ Richard asked.

‘Nothing,’ said Chipman like a child who was trying to cover up some misdeed.

‘You called him Domino.’

‘So what?’ said Chipman.

An expression of sly calm suddenly appeared on Richard's face. ‘So what, indeed,’ Richard seemed to be thinking as he eased his weight against Chipman's cubicle counter and complacently crossed his arms, cheerfully chastising himself for having overreacted. Some people are obsessive-compulsives. Richard merely had an instinct for devious caution, for hyper-vigilance in the cause of self-interested wile.

‘Hey, I didn't show *this* to anybody, if that's what's worrying you.’

As Chipman spoke these words he simultaneously slid open the bottom drawer of his desk. Inside was a stack of papers on top of which was a page from a yellow legal pad that, in my handwriting, read: WORK NOT DONE.

‘Oh, Christ,’ said Richard, kicking the drawer closed with his huge wing-tipped foot. Then he gingerly pulled out the desk drawer just enough to slide in his fingers and remove the piece of paper with the handwriting on it, crumpling it into a little paper ball that disappeared inside his right hand just before his hand disappeared within the pin-striped pocket of his trousers. ‘Now get rid of the rest of it, pinhead.’

‘I didn't know I was supposed to,’ said Chipman the Clueless.

‘What you don't know is going to seriously affect your advancement around here. Understood?’

‘Yeah,’ said Chipman.

‘Yeah?’ mocked Richard.

‘Yes, I understand.’

‘Good. And no more talk about anybody called Domino.’

‘Yes, I understand,’ Chipman mocked back. This was somewhat unwise because now he was on Richard's list as well as on mine. I wondered who would get to him first.

5

That same afternoon, Richard called an emergency ‘lunch meeting’ of The Seven—excuse me, Six. I didn't exactly need this distraction at the moment, since I was scrambling against the clock (darn that lost hour!) and was forced to divide my attention between the work at hand in my apartment and the lunchtime scene at the company.

Sidebar: Anthropologists who once held that all human activity could be reduced to the three F's—Feeding, Fighting, and, in the present instance, a little Fondling—would have been pleased to see how closely their hypothesis was enacted at the banquet table in that Gothic Gallery where I used to assemble with this contemptibly familiar cast of characters and where their lunch-meeting was now in progress.

Sherry popped the lid on a plastic bowl filled with vegetables sliced up into spears. But she suddenly stopped short. ‘I forgot to bring anything to drink,’ whined the Sherry-thing, who was sitting close to the head of the table, immediately to Richard's left. The meal that Richard had brought along consisted only of an extra thermos of coffee. He took a swig directly from the mouth of the thermos he had already opened

—a shining metal silo—and then slid it over to Sherry, who just gawked at it for a moment, as if she were looking at some exotic artifact she had never seen before.

'Here,' said Richard, slapping the plastic cap of the thermos before Sherry's eyes, which no more recognized this particular object than they had the other. 'You can use it as a cup,' Richard explained.

'But—' Sherry started to say.

'Yes, I know,' said Richard with fatherly wisdom and understanding. Then he reached down into Sherry's purse on the floor between them, rummaged around inside it, and came up with a miniature bottle of vodka. He casually ran his hand along Sherry's leg before bringing the dwarf-sized bottle up to her. 'Go ahead,' he said to her. 'Everybody knows.' Sherry went ahead and daintily dumped the spirits into the plastic container, then quickly dropped the evidence of her alcoholism back in her purse before pouring in the coffee, awkwardly maneuvering Richard's shining metal thermos.

Barry the Great-Bodied One removed the first of several hamburgers from a sack that sagged heavily upon that banquet table. But his eyes were fixed across the table at what Kerrie was shoveling into her mouth from a field-style plate with attached covering.

'What are you looking at, Mr America?' said Kerrie.

'I'm just trying to identify that stuff you're eating.'

'It's leftovers.'

'Right,' said Barry with a world of doubt in his voice.

Further down the table Mary sat before the cardboard dish—square and shallow—of a microwaved meal. (Swedish Meatballs and Noodles in Gravy—her favorite, although she

sometimes broke up the monotony with Salisbury Steak, topped with Mushroom Sauce, and Macaroni and Cheese.)

Harry wasn't eating, waving off Barry's offer of a hamburger. ‘I've got plenty,’ said Barry.

‘I'm sure you do, thanks,’ said the inscrutable Harry.

It was also lunchtime at the Metro Diner, and the place was packed. I didn't see the homicide detectives anywhere around. However, I knew they had run a check on my credit card activity: the gun shop, the clothes store, the... the... paper? (Did I buy a newspaper that night? If so, I wouldn't have used my credit card.) But even though I couldn't bring into my brain any other spending I had done, I couldn't shake the feeling that there was something else, something far more significant than paper, that was also being masked by those dark spots. In any case, I knew that soon the cops would be beating on my door, and it was imperative that Lillian made it up to my apartment before they did. My tactic for doing this involved a baseball bat that once served as my only means of ‘personal protection’. Gripping this shapely piece of wood, I stood before my computer monitor as if I were facing a hated pitcher on a rival team. I wound up my swing and—

‘All right, then,’ said Richard. ‘As we all know by now we have a problem.’

‘No kidding,’ said Sherry. ‘What happened? You said that Frank was finished. Instead we've got one dead Polack.’

‘These things don't always go according to plan,’ said Richard.

‘Yeah, like that girl, Andrea What's-Her-Name, ending up dead on your desk,’ said Kerrie, who continued sporking a

mysterious mash into her mouth. ‘You said Frank would go quietly. Now it's a mess.’

‘Before you leave the room to go vomit up your lunch, Kerrie, I'd like to point out that the problem wasn't with Domino—it was with Perry Stokowski. He was the mess.’

‘How so?’ asked Mary.

‘To put it simply, Perry wasn't quite a full member of our family.’

‘Please, Richard, I've got enough with my real family at home. I don't need to think in terms of a second family.’

‘That's where you're wrong, Mary,’ said Richard. ‘Let me ask you something. Who do you prefer spending your time with, not to mention most of your extra time—those people at home… or us?’

Mary looked thoughtfully down at the empty microwave-proof container on the table before her.

‘You can't lie to me, Mary. Or to the rest of us. We are your family. *We* are the only family that any of us have. Oh, some of you may have spouses or someone you live with, even children. But they aren't your family. Why do you think you're sitting at this table with us? It wasn't by chance, I can tell you. It's because I *chose* you.’

I had to call time-out back at my apartment because I had forgotten to unplug my computer. My purpose wasn't to start a fire in that old building but to get Lillian's attention. (And no, Kerrie, I would not be going quietly—I would go with quite a bit of noise and mayhem.) After I had dealt with the potential threat of an electrical fire, I finally swung my bat. Disappointingly, it made only a spider-web pattern of cracks in the computer screen. (Downstairs in the diner, amidst all the lunch-hour chewing and chattering, my first

hit went unnoticed. Strike one.) My next swing was dedicated to Andrea and the others who had been done in by Richard. I connected well with the monitor and sent it into the farthest bleachers, where Richard sat sipping coffee from a thermos on a sunny afternoon. In short order the monitor was just a pile of glass and plastic lying on the floor. Beside it was the keyboard whose teeth I then smashed with a lusty surge of madness. A momentary hiatus of conversation ensued in the diner below, as well as a suspension of service on the part of Rudy and the waitresses. And Lillian at last glanced upward toward my apartment.

'You may have hired all of us, Richard. But that includes Perry,' argued Mary. 'You said yourself that he wasn't a member of this family of yours.'

'I said he wasn't a *full* member. I thought he would have become so in time. But I didn't think it would take so long to wean him off that music nonsense on which he wasted so much of himself. He wasn't fully focused on the one important thing in all our lives—The Job. That caused him to let his guard down. Now he's gone, rest in peace.'

'Excuse me, Richard, but none of what you're saying accounts for Frank Dominio. If there was ever someone who wasn't one of us, it was Frank. Why in the world did you "choose" him?'

'Frank?' said Richard. 'He was one of the family too... in a red-headed stepchild capacity. The truth is we really needed Frank. Please don't take this personally, any of you. That is, each of you has your uses. Otherwise you wouldn't be here. But Frank had something the rest of you don't, including myself. It was just a matter of time before he brought it to us. None of us could have come up with that.'

‘You mean that idea of his?’ said Sherry.

‘That's right.’

‘What was so great about that?’ Sherry continued to badger. ‘You told us to give it the cold shoulder. It seemed to me that was exactly what it deserved.’

‘Barry,’ said Richard, turning to his right. ‘Would you enlighten her?’

Barry swallowed a cheek-stretching mouthful of macerated bread and meat, with extra-extra ketchup. Then he held up the remains of the object in his hand.

‘Do you know what this is, Sherry?’

‘Yeah—it's a hamburger, or what's left of one.’

‘It's also Frank's idea. But even he didn't realize that. Here's the analogy. It wasn't so long ago that some stroke of genius caused the creation of these ground slabs of beef and fat inserted between two pillowy pieces of bread. Of course it was only some time later that the full lucrative potential of this edible invention was realized. Could any of us have invented the hamburger? Not likely.’

Sherry suddenly smiled, a mouthful of coffee and vodka almost spilling forth. ‘But we would sure know how to market the things,’ she practically cried out.

‘Billions and billions of them,’ added Kerrie.

Swine, swine, swine, etc. Each utterance of this word was accompanied by a smashing blow upon the metal box of my modem. Then I dropped my bat, abandoning this primitive means of destruction, and went to work on the beast's entrails in the fashion of my new-born self—tying the transistors into the tiniest knots with only a twitch of my mind, melting wiring boards and decimating the soul of that thing—those diabolical chips—on an atomic level. Nobody was go-

ing to get into my mind through that infernal machine. And you, Richard—you knew, you *knew* my idea was brilliant, that I was worth more than all the rest of you. But you let me contort myself into a mass of obsessive doubt and self-loathing. Laugh while you can, you swine.

Mary was in fact tittering at her end of the table, while Richard was outright guffawing in a deep dark tone. Even Harry cracked a crooked grin. It was so nice to see such a happy family. But the magic moment died when Kerrie spoke up, hesitantly asking, 'But wasn't there a lot more documentation to Frank's idea? Don't we need that?'

'We'll see. Maybe we do and maybe we don't. We do want to cover all the bases, don't we, Harry?'

'Yes, sir,' Harry replied. Everyone else grew quiet.

'Do you think you can work as well without Perry's assistance?'

'It'll be better without him,' said Harry. 'It was because of him that the Andrea What's-Her-Name thing went badly. I never said anything.'

'I know,' said Richard. 'I didn't blame you.'

'He was a worthless drug addict,' said Harry. (As an addendum to Harry's remark, I should mention that it was Perry's syringe in his glove compartment that gave me the idea for the intravenous mode of his murder.) After Harry had finally gotten that bit of bile out of himself about Perry's dope fiendery, he looked over at Sherry and said, 'No offense.'

The eyes of the Sherry-thing glared at Harry. 'It's not the same thing,' she hissed. 'My name is Sherry. *And I am an alcoholic!* Got it?'

‘Uh, yeah,’ said Harry, who obviously couldn't have cared less one way or the other.

Lillian was finally knocking on my door and calling out my name. I had left the door slightly ajar, causing it to push open easily and allowing Lillian to exercise her landlord's privilege to investigate what all the noise was about in her tenant's apartment. Cautiously she entered the kitchen through the backstairs door. By the time Lillian was inside I had absented myself from visibility. The last thing I wanted was to put a scare into the only person who came close to being family to me. (You were right to a certain extent, Richard—I was as alienated as the rest of you from my own blood relations.)

Lillian did draw a startled breath when she first spied the mutilated machine lying about my apartment floor. I had pushed most of the pieces aside, creating a path to lead her straight to my desk and the shoe box that was waiting there for her. She picked up the box and mouthed the words written on its lid that addressed the package to her. She then reached under the apron she was wearing and from within her waitress's uniform produced a pocketknife. It was no Buck Skinner Hunting Knife but a business-like instrument nonetheless. Good for you, Lil, I thought. After pulling the blade from its slot, she cut the packing tape wrapped around the shoe box, lifted off the top, and gazed upon the stack of packets which constituted the whole of my worldly worth. ‘My god,’ she gasped. Quickly putting two and two together, she said aloud, ‘I guess this means I won't be seeing you any more, Frank. Good luck to you.’ Lillian looked so sad as she replaced the lid back on the box and cradled the package under her arm.

Before leaving my apartment, locking the door behind her with her landlord's key (‘Thank you, Lillian Hayes’), she turned for a moment to look around the place. She could not possibly have seen me as I watched her from my niche of the non-living. But somehow she fixed her eyes, if briefly, on the exact spot where I was looking back at her. Then she was gone, and I shifted my visual and auditory attention back to the gathering in the Great Hall.

‘One more thing,’ said Mary. ‘I assume we're not doing this just so the company can make a pile out of it and leave us with, at most, some miserable little “bonus”?’

‘As the head of this family I must withhold from you, for your own good, mind you, the full details of this venture. For now let me just say that things are going to get a little rickety around here once Barry's plan for restructuring the company is put in place—all of this having been done, of course, at the behest of the CEO and seconded by all of senior management. There just may be a period of declining profits visited on this house due to a chaotic work environment. Soon the stockholders will begin making sounds of discontent and start pawing the ground like a herd of unfed cattle looking for some new cowboys to run the ranch—people with fresh ideas and special plans. Before you know it… *we* will be the company.’

But one thing at a time, they agreed.

First things first, they agreed.

And that first thing was Domino, who could queer this whole business if they didn't get to him before the cops did.

That was your cue, Harry. And I'd be keeping a special eye on you.

I have to confess that I was as much relieved as I was enraged by the revelations of infamy that the lunch-meeting of The Six had afforded my long-distance eyes and ears. Not that they proved themselves to be any more swinish than I had imagined them to be. They couldn't possibly have done that. But my image of them had always been that of a pack of beasts whose deeds were performed somewhat haphazardly, directed by a low animal instinct that sniffed out creatures who were not of their breed and marked them for a mindless savaging. Given this conception of their brutish nature, I was naturally driven to respond in kind with plans for a very basic style of massacre, although one for which I had accessorized myself to the hilt with all the appropriate gear and suitably dark attire. Therefore, what a surprise—at once disturbing and delightful—to discover how well these beings knew what they were about.

Disturbing because they had schemes and strategies and an ambitious end in sight. They had turned out to be a tribe of true fiends, a devilish cabal, a Machiavellian mob with Richard as The Prince who commanded a court of henchpersons.

Delightful for the very same reasons. I found it so satisfying to have my worst suspicions about The Six, formerly Seven, finally, unequivocally confirmed. They were indeed a bad lot. My murder-filled mind—driven by an obsessive-compulsive engine of emotion which the nonafflicted cannot hope to comprehend, spinning itself on a carousel of Fear, Hate, Humiliation, and divers other riderless horses of my personal apocalypse—had *not* gone too far in its violent fantasies.

Yet fantasies were all they amounted to. Even when I began making preparations to behave in accordance with my raging impulses, which, I concede, were a bit overblown for having been planted so deeply within me and suppressed far too long—the situation was still at the stage of daydreams and play-acting. And the Day of Domino was destined never to arrive—not as I had originally conceived it as a bullet-fest on Monday morning. (Who can say if I would actually have gone through with it?) That day had not only been pushed back (due to circumstances beyond my control and still obscure to my mind, however much I sought them out); it had also been drastically altered in its possibilities.

Let's step back for a moment. Frank Dominio was a man of hyper-charged and off-kilter imagination, no denying it; but he had always been held back by his fears and inner demons. Domino, on the other hand, was not only completely warped, he also belonged to a class of demon himself. Both of them did share many like qualities. Among these was an eagerness to get started on a project, if only to put it behind them as soon as possible. Thus, my work, our work, was not deferred until Monday but began as Wednesday passed into Thursday (EDT). And short work it was that we, 'I' for the sake of convenience, made of Mr Stokowski.

I giggled like a child on Christmas morning as I tackled each task with respect to Perry the Piano Player, Perry the Jazz-Creep (big deal if his penchant for music was deep and genuine, rather than the put-on I took it to be), and, as Harry called him, Perry the Worthless Drug Addict. The whole business of that night was, for me, therapeutic in a way that none of the pills or psychiatric services I had consumed over the years had ever been.

And that was exactly the problem: I was so satiated by the job I had done on Perry Stokowski that I feared I might lack the Will to follow through with the others on my gun-shop shopping list. So where would that have left me? What becomes of an ontological anomaly—that is, my own miracle-working self—when he begins to feel that his WORK, in fact, IS DONE? The dark constellations spread across the sky during the final hours of that night, along with the sooty stains that appeared when the sun rose, an hour late, the following day, did not strike me as happy portents of what lay in store for me once I had played out my purposes in the, so to speak, grand scheme of things.

Hence my relief—and double-hence my delight—at having my sheer ferocity of Will renewed by the Gang of Six at their truly revelatory lunch-meeting on Thursday afternoon. The game would now go on, and my salvation, at least for a time, was assured.

The only consternation that remained had nothing to do with Richard's foul family, with their degeneracies and devices, their sleazy comic-strip machinations, their hideous façades which hid faces that could not be countenanced. No, that was not the problem. The only source of shock left to me was that of my own lingering innocence and naiveté, the fondness I had for keeping my hot head in the cool sand. I had not given those swine nearly enough credit... and my credit card could not have ordered nearly enough firepower to obliterate the things that transpired in their closed-door sessions, not to mention the ever-hatching horrors which such meetings were designed to propagate, the monstrous things that popped up and hopped about, just waiting for those doors to open onto the world. This sort of thing had

been going on since doors were invented… and they happened everywhere and at all times since the first hominids got together to ‘take a meeting’.

Generally speaking: Expect nothing but nightmarish obscenities to be born when human heads come together in intercourse.

More generally speaking: Whatever is born will ultimately grow into a nightmarish obscenity—in the grand scheme of things.

Speaking for myself: There are no angels unless they are Angels of Death… and I would never again doubt my place among them or lose my resolve to serve in their wild ranks.

7

In order to function with any effectiveness in the world, you—and that includes you—are forced to make a number of absurd assumptions. Chief among these is the assumption that yours is a reasonably sound mind in a more or less sound body moving within a rock-solid reality. Even an alcoholic like Sherry Mercer could account for any glitches that occurred in her psycho-sensory apparatus by blaming it on the booze, something she had handled relatively well in the past and had every reason to expect she could handle just as well for many years to come. This situation had begun to change for her not long after the lunch-meeting, which was the last time she would ever know anything resembling mental or metaphysical stability.

‘Is everything okay, Sherry?’ said one of her female staff as they were talking over some minor matters in Sherry's office.

‘Everything's fine,’ Sherry replied. ‘But maybe we could finish this up tomorrow morning if you don't mind.’

‘No problem,’ said the young woman as she got up from her chair. Sherry opened the door and showed her out of the office. Then she closed the door once again, her hand trembling as it held tight to the inside door knob.

Thanks to Barry's restructuring of the company, Sherry was assigned a newly created position that came with a small private office. Previously this was a luxury and a convenience, enabling her to consume whatever quantity of alcohol she desired throughout the day and to do so in quietly dignified surroundings. Henceforth, however, that office might as well have been located deep in the heart of Hell (medieval, not modern, in the scheme of its decor).

After Sherry had closed the office door she closed her eyes. Then she haltingly turned her head toward that part of the wall which had been momentarily concealed when she opened the door. Sherry's eyelashes slowly parted, and her gaze was now directly fixed upon a place where the wall met the floor of her office.

There it was again. There it was still. It hadn't gone away, as Sherry had hoped it would.

During their meeting, she had successfully drawn the young woman's attention to that particular section of the wall. (‘Is that a bug or something over there?’ said Sherry, pointing right at the spot.) But she hadn't seemed to notice anything unusual within that space. Of course neither had Sherry seen anything there until a few hours ago.

But there it was again.

Behind Sherry's office door was another door. It was small and dark and ugly, a dwarf-sized portal that bulged

from the wall like a scab. Its surface was coarse and irregular, as if it had been molded out of clay rather than cut from wood. Nonetheless, there did appear to be an intricate grain running through it, swirling into the door's many grooves and gouges, curling into roughly circular knots. Sherry tried not to look too closely at the dense patterns of the door, in which she had already seen a variety of little faces and parts of faces, each of them as twisted and ugly as the door itself. But this time she did squat down so that she was at eye-level with the upper edge of the door, bringing herself nearer to the thing than she had previously dared to go. Then, as though attempting to verify the nature of this phenomenon —whether actual or hallucinatory—she poised a pointy-nailed finger very close to it, ready to make a few quick taps. That was when the trouble started. Because as soon as she made contact with the door… her fingernail became stuck there, caught like a fly in what seemed to be a kind of tight-knit webbing rather than wood or even clay. As she pulled to extricate herself from the grasp of the door, she found that her finger sunk only more deeply into it and was soon trapped up to the cuticle.

Of course she might have called for any number of people who sat in the cubicles outside her office… and maybe that would have made things all right for her once more. (She had no way of knowing otherwise.) However, being the Sherry-thing that she was, she wouldn't want to be seen in her presently ridiculous—perhaps even certifiably deranged —posture. She was now seated on the floor, her short shirt riding up her rear end as she struggled to free herself, her fingertip stuck in something that no one else could see. Then —

Knock-knock-knock.

But the knocking wasn't for Sherry, it was for me. Detectives White and Black were standing outside the door that led to the backstairs of my apartment. Through the parted curtains on the door's window I stared out at the two men, who looked right through me, peering as far as they could inside. Perhaps they had a warrant to search the place for my Buck Skinner Hunting Knife, which, depending on the judge they petitioned, might be considered as the deadly tool used to sever the hands of Perry Stokowski. I hadn't been following very closely the activities of these workmanlike sleuths, so I didn't know what to expect.

In any case, I thought that even if they did bust into my apartment, with or without a warrant, they wouldn't have found the knife, because somehow I had taken it with me when I entered into that spooky state of being I now enjoyed: it only took solid form when I did, and, like my black clothes and amber-tinted eyeglasses, it dissolved into thin air or moved through solid objects whenever it suited me to do so. What could be more silly than a set of clothes walking around with a pair of eyeglasses hovering over them? Or an unheld knife with a thirteen-inch blade floating down the street? So I was ready for anything the homicide detectives might have had in mind, which was something beyond my powers to know. Whatever miraculous feats I was able to perform, I still seemed to be bound by certain rules, just like anything else in this stinking world, be it animal, vegetable, mineral, vapor-form, human, superhuman, or whatever else —with all your imagination—you might be able to conceive. Everything that exists is subject to limitations imposed upon it by forces within and forces without. There are no excep-

tions or exemptions, although there may be some striking transformations.

Just witness what my bulked-up being was now able to do with Sherry, whose finger was sinking deeper and deeper into that ugly door. It was all my idea, my plan—at least to the extent that anyone can lay claim to an idea or plan as his very own. But how did I know I could do it? I had never done such a thing before. My original intent, way back when, was to send a bullet or two from the barrel of my Glock 17, or perhaps my Firestar, into the brain of a hated enemy, someone who had conspired to drop me into the deep end of a hell from which I did not have the power to drag myself out.

By what power, though, would my finger have pulled the trigger of that Glock, or Firestar? I knew that my Brain would ultimately give the command to shoot, shouting out, in so many words, 'OK, Finger—ready, set, fire.' But I also knew that my Brain took its orders from my Body, while at the same time functioning as an integrated part of my Body. In addition, both my Body and my Brain (as an integrated part of my Body) were reacting to pressures placed upon them by other Bodies and other Brains, such as that of Sherry in her capacity as an individual Body-Brain unit, or those of The Seven acting as a group of Bodies and Brains... not to mention the sundry other pressures exerted by objects and events that were without a human Body or a human Brain, including the weather, Daylight Savings Time, insects—the entire nonhuman world in general.

So how was it that all these Bodies and Brains, including my own, along with countless other nonhuman factors, such as the cockroaches that infested my apartment, could all coordinate in order to force my finger to pull the trigger of a

Glock, or a Firestar, and pump some fragments of metal into Sherry Mercer's worthless Brain and well-formed Body? How could this task, or any other in this crying-shame of a world, ever be accomplished? What *precisely* was the chain of command—the source of this whole mess, the line of historical phenomena which along the way included my overwhelming urge to purchase a selection of handguns and a Buck Skinner Hunting Knife, and then later inspired me with the notion of creating this ugly little door which only Sherry, and of course I, could see… and that Sherry was now stuck in up to her slender wrist?

Answer: No answer, obviously.

Question: Withdrawn at the request of my dizzied Brain.

Orders to the Troops: Keep focused and continue the assault until all traces of the Sherry-pain, like that of the Perry-pain, had been neutralized.

And now the ugly little doorknob on that ugly little door began to jiggle back and forth, squeaking in Sherry's ears. It was shaped something like the head of a small monkey, but Sherry grabbed the knob without flinching, her fear of what might be trying to come through the door overcoming the loathsome look and weblike feel of all those whorls and knotholes, those little faces and parts of faces. She tried to use her hold on the knob as leverage to pull her other hand free. With this action, unfortunately, she only sank deeper into the thing, which worked in the same manner as a mind trapped in a web of obsessive thoughts: the more that you—

and definitely me—struggled to pry loose, the more tightly we would be held.

By now Sherry could feel the knob-thing pulsing with a squirmy sort of life in her one hand, while her other was lost in a place where it was being caressed by something nameless, which nevertheless might still be described as a wriggling darkness, a black world of worms slithering around her hand and between her fingers. Her eyes had opened so very wide—those Sherry-thing eyes. And now her mouth, which had once talked so much Sherry-thing talk, tried to scream. But no sound came out of that mouth. There were also other effects worked upon Sherry's body and brain, but it's better that some things be carried out behind closed doors... and my attention was being called elsewhere.

Apparently the homicide detectives had indeed been unable to secure a warrant to search my apartment. Detective White did rattle my doorknob rather vigorously in hopes that the worm-eaten wood around the lock might give way and allow him and his partner illegal access to the suspect's residence. If I hadn't been otherwise occupied, I would have allowed them entry, purely out of politeness. Instead, the detectives had to march back down the stairs behind the diner and were now in the process of interviewing Lillian across her counter.

The place was all but empty of customers, with the exception of Harry, who was sipping coffee at the other end of the counter from Lillian and the homicide detectives.

‘I do wish I could help you,’ said Lillian softly. ‘But I feel I must respect the privacy of my tenant.’

‘We could come back with a warrant,’ said Detective Black.

‘That would be another matter,’ said Lillian.

As the detectives continued to question Lillian, Harry was now mumbling into his cell phone out of anyone's earshot… except my own.

‘Yeah, she's the landlord,’ Harry, head down, said to Richard on the other end of the line, or rather the frequency, to Harry's phone.

‘What is she saying?’ said Richard.

‘It's what she's *not* saying. She's lying her head off to the cops, that much I can tell.’

Detective White was trying to conceal his exasperation with the soft-spoken and flawlessly evasive responses of the diner's proprietor.

‘So when was the last time you saw him?’ he asked.

‘I couldn't say,’ said Lillian.

‘Does he ever come into the diner?’ asked Detective Black.

‘Sometimes he does.’

Harry was able to tell that Lillian was lying to the homicide detectives because he himself must have done the same thing over and again during his career, as I inferred from my intrusions into the files of various agencies of law enforcement. Previous to Richard's hiring him (‘scouting’ would be a more apt term), the man I once regarded as Harry the Enigma was also known as Hank the Plumber, Joe the Roofer, and Bob the Encyclopedia Salesman, among other aliases he used for both profit (home invasion, confidence artistry; five prison years served over the course of ten life years) and pleasure (several charges of molestation involving minors, majors, and some truly aged persons when he worked as Ken the Orderly at a nursing home; no convictions).

‘She's very good,’ said Harry to Richard. ‘I'm fairly sure she could tell us something.’

‘Then find out what that something might be,’ said Richard.

‘It might be messy,’ warned Harry.

‘So be it. Messy is fine. It's sloppy I don't need.’

All right, then, Richard the Ringleader!

The homicide detectives now seemed absolutely stymied by the fact that this old woman in a waitress's uniform was getting the best of them.

‘How did he seem to you when you last saw him?’ asked Detective White.

‘I already said that I couldn't say when I last saw him,’ said Lillian.

‘Does he usually come home at a particular time?’ asked Detective Black.

‘Maybe he does, I don't know. I really don't follow his comings and goings. I've got a business to run.’

‘Did you know that he was recently forced to resign from his job?’ asked Detective White.

‘That wouldn't be any of my business,’ said Lillian.

Having been subjected long enough to Lillian's dazzling song-and-dance, which almost moved me to tears of thanks for her protectiveness in my favor, the detectives left their card and then left the diner with two coffees to go, compliments of the house. Soon afterward Harry paid for his coffee and took his leave, only to return a few hours later as Lillian was locking up for the day.

Before Lillian had turned the key in the door, Harry came up behind her.

Before Harry came up behind her, I stepped into Lillian's body and took over its workings, placing her mind in a state of pleasant unconsciousness while I went about my business. This was another new idea of mine that came to me on the spur of the moment. I had no special plan except to keep Lillian safe. I would just have to play the rest of it by ear, and when it was over, assuming all went well, send Lillian on her way home without any alarm in her heart or memories in her head.

'Please move back inside, Ma'am,' said Harry, shoving a gun barrel into Lillian's back and nearly causing her to drop the brown carry-out bag she was juggling along with her purse while she was locking up. 'And I'll take those keys if it's all the same to you.'

Lillian had securely folded and stapled the carry-out bag, so Harry couldn't have guessed that it contained the life savings of Frank Dominio. As he maneuvered her away from the front window, Lillian said (or rather I said using Lillian's vocal cords), 'What is it you want, young man?'

Harry smiled at the casual tone of the question. 'I would like to rape and rob you,' he replied.

'Anything else?'

'Yes. I would like your key to the apartment upstairs. I assume you have one.'

'I surely do,' said Lillian. 'Would you mind if I set these things down on the counter?'

'Not at all.'

'Thank you. Now you said you wanted to rob me. Let me see how much I've got in my handbag.'

'Cut it out,' Harry yelled as he knocked Lillian's purse to the other side of the counter.

‘No reason to act so rude,’ said Lillian. ‘Just a joke. I know you're not looking for some small change from this old handbag. I can see you're not just some *worthless drug addict*. Not like some people.’

Immediately Harry's attention became divided between the words he had used earlier that day to describe Perry Stokowski and the business of the moment. For a second he froze into the pose of a classic, gun-pointing hood, not even noticing that Lillian had already turned away and was headed down a hallway into the shadows of the closed diner.

‘What you're looking for,’ she called out from the darkness. ‘It's back here.’

‘Hold it,’ shouted Harry.

‘You hold it,’ said Lillian as she opened a creaky door and switched on a light, causing a little room to appear at the end of the hallway.

When Harry entered the little room he saw Lillian standing in the corner and leaning over an old safe that opened from the top. After tuning in the combination she pulled at a metal handle and exposed the contents of the safe. ‘Lots of money in here, boy,’ she said. ‘I was going to bring it to the bank tomorrow, just like I do every Friday.’

‘Take it out,’ Harry ordered.

‘What do you think I'm doing?’ said Lillian. After she had brought out the heavy cloth bag that contained the cash taken in at the diner, Lillian reached into the depths of the old safe and pulled up something else. ‘I imagine you'd be interested in this too,’ she said as she held out a stack of papers secured by a single rubber band. Harry read the words printed on the first page: ‘New Product’, and below these —‘Frank Dominio’.

‘I knew you were lying to those cops,’ Harry said in a self-satisfied voice.

‘And aren't you the smart boy for taking note of that. It's too bad, though, that you won't be able to walk away with any of this loot, never mind the papers.’

‘What's stopping me?’ said Harry.

‘Well, for one thing,’ said Lillian, ‘you can't open that door.’

Harry quickly turned around and realized that the door which had creaked open so loudly had somehow closed behind him without making a sound. When he swiveled back toward Lillian, she said, ‘And for another thing, your gun won't work any more.’

Harry pulled the trigger of his weapon (not a Glock). But the only thing that emerged from it was a molten blob of metal, which trickled out of the cylindrical barrel like water dripping from a leaky faucet. Then the light bulb in the ceiling began to fade until the room was submerged in blackness.

These were strange phenomena in their own right. But the thing that really unsettled Harry was the sound of something bubbling up from inside the safe, illuminating the room with strangely jittering colors as it rose to the rim and emitted a vaporous stench. Harry gagged and covered his mouth with his free hand. Speaking through his fingers, he said, ‘What's going on? What is that?’

‘Soup of the day, boy—Cream of Mucous Membrane. I thought it might be something you'd like, you being a sexual offender and all. It does smell some.’

Harry was now choking and gagging at the same time. Finally he managed to cough out a few words. ‘Who are you?’

he said.

It was Lillian who looked into Harry's eyes, a lurid rainbow of glowing colors playing across her face, her mouth grinning wide. But it was my voice that answered Harry's question.

'It's me, Harry,' I said. 'It's Domino.'

I could have gone on gloating like that for some time if Harry's cell phone hadn't started chirping inside his coat pocket. This forced me to rush things, since I wanted to take that call. With lightning speed that surprised even me, I had the phone in my—that is, Lillian's—hand. By the time it was between its second and third rings, Harry was gone. The skin of his face was still bobbing up and down in the soup as it receded down into the darkness whence it came. The light in the little room switched back on.

I flipped open Harry's phone and put it to my ear. 'Hoy-hoy,' I said, continuing to speak in my own voice.

'What?' said the man on the other end, who was Richard.

'I said "Hoy-hoy". That's the phrase first put forth by Alexander Graham Bell as the standard greeting to be spoken into his new invention. Well, it wasn't just *his* invention... but he ended up getting all the credit for it in the public mind. That's the old story, isn't it? Especially when we—meaning you and me—are talking about brilliant and profitable inventions.'

'Is that what we're talking about?'

'You *know* that it is.'

'Where's Harry?' said Richard.

'Work not done,' I replied.

'I see,' said Richard. 'What happened exactly?'

‘Sorry, Richard, but I really can't say myself what happened… exactly. Nothing that Harry enjoyed very much, I'm pretty sure on that score. And while we're on the subject, you might want to look in on Sherry.’

‘I'll do that,’ said Richard.

As I stated earlier, in order to function with any effectiveness in this world you have to make some absurd assumptions. My assumption of the moment was that Richard should have sounded far more rattled by our conversation. But this wasn't the case at all.

‘That's three guys out,’ I said, making the mistake of trying to get a rise out of my one-time boss. ‘Four to go, not counting Chipman.’

‘You're really a very bad man,’ said Richard.

‘Yes, I am,’ I said. ‘But you can take the credit for that.’

‘That's no more than false modesty coming from someone with such an enormous ego. Too bad you never recognized that in yourself. We could have worked very well together if you had. It must be quite painful to have such big plans without being able to admit what an ambitious swine you really are.’

‘Swine?’ I said, my composure continuing to crack. I had never shared that epithet with anyone at the company.

‘Isn't that what you thought of the rest of us?’

‘More or less. It's a common term of derogation.’

‘I suppose it is. I must have heard it used around the office. Or maybe I just dreamed it. I believe that dreams can be quite helpful in our lives. How about you?’

I was beginning to regret having answered Harry's phone. ‘I think we've said about all we have to say to each other. Unless there's something you'd like to add.’

‘Like what?’ said Richard.

‘I don't know. Something threatening. Like telling me I'm a dead man, for instance.’

‘No, not at all,’ said Richard. ‘As far as that goes, I already *know* that you're not a dead man. But neither are you alive, isn't that right, Domino?’

Then Richard hung up, leaving me once again with a mind that was racing with incalculable doubts and questions and, above all, fear.

8

On Richard's orders, Chipman went to see what was what with Sherry. It was just after the close of the work day and the floor on which Sherry's office was located was quiet and empty, save for a few members of the cleaning staff who moved among the cubicles, emptying out each employee's trash containers and doing a bit of vacuuming. Knocking lightly on the door of Sherry's office, Chipman looked around for anyone who might be observing him before slipping into the room and closing himself inside.

‘What the hell,’ said Chipman aloud.

The ceiling light still illuminated the windowless office, but it was dim and flickered at strobe-like intervals. This was done strictly for effect on my part, as was the general disarray of the room, which appeared as if a miniature whirlwind had turned the place all higgledy-piggledy, with bookshelves knocked to the floor, a desk that leaned at a forty-five degree angle against the wall, and the contents of every file drawer and desk drawer scattered everywhere. While there was no sign of Sherry, her purse was among the disturbed contents within those four walls. Chipman saw it at the back of the

room, its strap torn off and its leather outerskin crushed like a deflated football.

As he stepped cautiously through the debris, Chipman saw something glinting on the floor, something that blinked in sequence with the ceiling light and which animated the scene around him. Bending down, he picked up the object, which to all appearances was a hand mirror that had been dumped, along with everything else, from Sherry's purse. Light and shadow skittered across the reflecting surface of the mirror. This was all that Chipman could see at first. But as he inspected the object more closely he noticed that there was also a face in that mirror... and the face was not his own. Nor was it Sherry's face, exactly. But it was the face of something, some Sherry-like thing, some creature from which almost every vestige of Sherry had been distilled and only the Thing part remained. And it seemed to be screaming with what seemed to be a mouth full of craggy teeth that, seemingly, were trying to eat their way out of the mirror.

Chipman dropped the mirror to the floor immediately, instinctively. Then he started crushing it underfoot, stomping on it with the heel of his shoe until the mirror was only a collection of sharp, glittering fragments which he frantically kicked into every corner of the room, thereby dispersing the image of something that had quickened his breathing and made his eyes stare as if they could still see the face in the mirror.

Standing amid the tremulous shadows of that office—its furnishings all atilt, little slivers of a funhouse mirror still shining among the debris about him—Chipman appeared lost within the narrow corridors of dark reverie. But he was brought back to himself when, from somewhere in the chaos

of Sherry Mercer's old office, the telephone began to ring. Chipman scrambled toward the source of that mad warbling sound, which was not at all like the friendly twitter he was used to hearing from the modern phones in the company's offices. He finally tracked the noise to its hiding place beneath a mound of file folders that littered the floor.

'Yeah,' said Chipman, abandoning the formal salutations of the workplace.

'Chipman?' asked the voice on the phone.

'Yes, this is he,' he said, laughing a little.

'Where's Sherry?'

'She's... I don't know, Richard. She's not in her office. Something's wrong here. The place looks like it's been ransacked and... well, her purse is here but... maybe you should see it for yourself.'

'All right, settle down.'

'I am settled down,' said Chipman.

'You don't sound like it.'

'Well, it's just that... there was something.'

'Listen to me, Chipman. I'm going to ask you a question, and you're going to answer with a simple yes or no. Besides the condition of Sherry's office and the fact that her purse is still there—'

'It's practically ripped apart. Someone must have—'

'Let me finish. Besides what you've told me, the ransacking and so forth, have you seen, or perhaps heard, anything else, anything... that might seem out of the ordinary?'

'Yes,' answered Chipman as instructed. 'I saw something.'

'That's good, you're doing fine. One more question—yes or no answer. What you saw, was it something that made

you feel as if—'

'Richard, I thought I was losing my mind,' Chipman interjected.

'All right, that's good.'

'It's good that I thought I was losing my mind?' Chipman said almost belligerently.

'No. It's good that you told me the truth. Now, I want you to go home. Leave the building right away. Tomorrow morning there's going to be a meeting, and I want you to be there. Just watch yourself until then. Can you do that?'

'I think I can do that,' said Chipman without a hint of conviction.

'All right, then,' said Richard. 'One more thing—'

Then the phone went dead. Chipman tried to bring it back to life to call Richard back, but it was gone. Tossing the defunct receiver to the floor, Chipman said to himself, 'I'm going to go home now. Richard said I should go home.' Then he turned and saw what was written on the door of the office. The words were scored into the wood in precise block lettering, carved quite deeply. And they hadn't been there before, those words—

WORK NOT DONE.

Chipman suddenly charged the door and opened it, as if any hesitation might result in a loss of nerve that might keep him trapped in that office—looking at those words—forever. But on the other side of the door there was only another door.

WORK NOT DONE.

And behind him there was only a dark wall illuminated by a flickering light.

Chipman now seemed to be listening for something, perhaps the comforting sound of the vacuum cleaners being pushed across the carpeted hallways and among the cubicles of the company offices. He called for help, but there was no one who could hear him. Because he wasn't in the company offices any more. He really wasn't anywhere. Nevertheless, he kept calling for help... and he kept opening door after door: WORK NOT DONE, WORK NOT DONE, WORK NOT DONE...

After a while even I could no longer follow him into that place of endless doors and darkness.

Part III

1

MEMO TO: You
FROM: Me
DATE: Thursday Evening
SUBJECT: The Darkness

As many of you have already realized, I did not give up my intentions of crafting a document that, in an earlier section, I described as my Ultimate Statement. This document, or statement, had merely mutated into a different format—from a ranting declaration into what might be categorized as a paranormal memoir: a work-in-progress of uncertain form, very much like its creator. Among the principal elements to emerge in this latter form was that sinister presence whose sign and symbol had appeared to me as (1) a river of blackness; (2) a constellation of dark stars which filled the darkness *behind* the darkness of the night sky; (3) 'dark spots' that, despite my enhanced perception of the world around me, still obscured certain crucial things from my view, most prominently any knowledge concerning the peculiar—'non-living'– state in which I now existed; and (4) stains or smudges of darkness which spread across the sky at all hours and grew increasingly prominent each time I knocked the living daylights out of one of The Seven (plus Chipman).

At the time specified above, it was the last of these four phenomena that most preoccupied me, given that I had eliminated no fewer than three persons before sundown (which, of course, was still an hour behind on the clocks in

my time zone and would remain so for one more October day). Even during the later hours of Thursday afternoon, following my annihilation of Sherry Mercer and the man I knew as Harry Smith-Jones, the world outside my apartment windows was stuck in a shade of deep twilight as far as I could see.

The dark stains hovered in the sky above the old buildings of the downtown area and extended into the distance across the river, creating a cityscape that was so evenly overcast that it took on the phony look of a stage-setting or a day-for-night scene in a low-budget movie. Furthermore, sometime after I sent Chipman to his doom, there was a definite moment when things took on a still darker tint, as if to mark the precise time when the Young Supervisor could no longer deny to himself the heart-stopping fact that he would never find his way to the end of that infinite series of doors.

Clearly a pattern was discernable in these darkenings that came upon the heels of each act of uncanny mayhem that I worked upon my former colleagues. I wondered if this was a sign of one of those stupid rules that encumbered us all, living or non-living, a law of limitation that read: 'This far and no farther,' or possibly, 'This many and no more.' Anyhow, after a rather busy day of putting down bad beasts, I decided to pause that evening to reflect upon this pattern I had observed. As I lay, in bodily form, on the sofa in the living room of my apartment—that wonderfully bleak penthouse above Lillian's downtown diner—I roughly estimated that at the rate that these darkenings were encroaching on my world, I would be able to eliminate my remaining coworkers, that is my erstwhile coworkers, just before I myself was plunged into a realm of permanent and total darkness, sink-

ing back into that metaphorical river of blackness from which I had, by means unknown to me, somehow escaped before I had become entirely submerged into its greasy waters.

This realization (if it wasn't purely a matter of imagination, I thought) was a disheartening one. Because as satisfying as I found my work of exterminating these vermin in whatever bizarre manner I could conceive, my mind had already begun turning toward bigger things, more elaborate schemes on a far greater scale. After all, the planet that I inhabited, the reality in which I was captured, was brimming with all kinds of potential victims, all of whom, to some degree, were swine that I dearly wanted to lead into my house of slaughter.

This feeling of mine, this passion, was absolutely confirmed and bolstered during those moments when I had occupied the body of Lillian Hayes for the purpose of liquidating, in a literal sense, Harry the Robber and Rapist. Now here was a woman who, I believed, was as decent as anyone could be, as close to being a non-swine as any human being could get. And yet all the time that I inhabited her physical body, I could feel how intimately that body—in both its physical and metaphysical aspects—was connected to that now familiar darkness, that sinister presence... a presence that might well have been named The Great Black Swine—a grunting, bestial force that animated, that *used* our bodies to frolic in whatever mucky thing came its way, lasciviously agitating itself in that black river in which the human species only bobbed about like hunks of excrement. Indeed, after inhabiting the body of another—in this case the body of Lillian Hayes—it seemed to me that the idea of a human

species, of anything like a ‘person’ (or persons known or unknown) was only a figure of speech, a convenient delusion.

Then, sometime between dumping Harry in the soup and sending Chipman into a maddening oblivion, it occurred to me: *All of them must be done away with… everyone must go!*

And as I lay on the sofa in the living room of my apartment I could only lament that I would not be able to continue my work beyond The Seven (Chipman notwithstanding). A limit had been placed on my labors before the blackness would close in on me entirely. I was still being manipulated, I was still being crowded and conspired against by something beyond my control and frustrating to my Will. But then something happened, right in the living room of my apartment, that served to reconcile me to this situation, or at least instill in my soul a sense of grim resignation.

It took the form of a cockroach scuttling across the carpet. I jumped up from the sofa and, with a rapidity and precision that came along with my peculiar state of existence, I trapped the creature beneath my heavy black boot without killing it. Even through the thick sole of that boot I could feel the bug scuttling in place. At this point I was merely in physical connection with it. Next, I established a deeper communion with this vermin, letting a little bit of myself flow into its body, linking me to its life in the same manner that I had joined myself to Lillian Hayes. Although my immersion into the roach was not as complete as it had been with Lillian, I nonetheless felt the exact same sensation: there was nothing especially ‘roachy’ inside the roach any more than there was anything of a distinct ‘person’ inside of Lillian—once the dark interior of each had been penetrated, there was only that buzz of swinish agitation and turbulent

blackness. The Great Black Swine was thrashing about inside the cockroach just as it had within Lillian Hayes, the only difference being that any sense of delusion about being some kind of thing-in-the-world was missing from the insect, or perhaps it was only so faint that I could not detect it.

Was it simply a matter of degree? Between the cockroach and the proprietor of the Metro Diner there spread quite a spectrum of organic life. Was there a corresponding spectrum of delusion about being things-in-the-world? For instance, I've noticed—and who hasn't?—that cats seem to regard themselves in a way very similar to that of humans... and vice versa. 'Cats are people,' I heard the voice of an old woman speak from somewhere in my memory. And, from a feline perspective, people might very well seem to be cats. And inside of all of them—the thrashing agitation of the Devouring Swine, the Conspiratorial Swine, and, yes, the Murdering Swine. This was the only Thing-in-the-World. The rest of it was only costumes and masks, the inventory of an ancient and still flourishing theatrical supply company.

And they would all have to go—people, cats, roaches, plants, *all of it had to go*.

But I knew that I—whatever 'I' was—would not be the one to do it. The work was too immense, the scale of slaughter impossible to attain. The assurance that every speck of living matter had been swept from this world—and what about all the other worlds?—would have to remain in the realm of Never-To-Be... the beatific dream of an obsessive-compulsive life form.

However, it was all over for the roach. When I pressed my boot down to the floor I could feel everything go still and silent within that little body where before there had been only

a vicious thrashing in blackness. I even felt a little part of myself—the part of me I had allowed to leak into the bug—grow still and silent. It felt good. Very good, however fleeting the feeling had been. I can truly say that it was the only moment of real well-being I had ever experienced in my life, if my present state of existence could in fact be considered part of that fabrication I called my life.

And at that moment I was sure that I was still living in some way—that even if I was not entirely alive, neither was I wholly dead. Somehow I was caught in between these two worlds—caught in a place where I had made a rare connection with that Great Black Swine, that thrashing and vicious blackness which flowed like a river through every living thing, and possibly in the spaces around everything that lived, allowing me to be wherever the blackness flowed, to become one with this agitated force that was everywhere and inside everything, that moved and manipulated all the created life of this world and gave me the power to move and manipulate things according to my will, which was nevertheless only the lower-case will of an isolated being—a cockroach elevated to human form, a small swirling of that flowing blackness that was as great and enduring as the world itself, that was the secret face of the living world, the shadow within all life, the thing that would live on and on as each one of us died our deaths alone. Because whatever life we had was only *its* life, and when our bodies, our cockroach bodies, became too damaged to accommodate it... this blackness flowed away, leaving behind it a dead vine, a bug's crushed carapace, or a human corpse—things that had no life of their own, nothing real at all about them.

Yet if my life was all delusion, it was an inescapable delusion that I—and, alas, even you—could not fail to follow wherever it might lead. And I still had four more beings to blow away from this creepy existence. Until that was accomplished my work was not yet done, and my life (or non-life, as it were) seemed undeniably worth living. Somehow I had been given the power to finish the work I had begun when I entered that downtown gun shop to purchase a load of firearms and a Buck Skinner Hunting Knife.

I—and you—now understood: We were brought into this world out of nothing.

I—and you—now understood: We were kept alive in some form, any form, as long as we were viciously thrashing about, acting out our most intensely vital impulses, never allowed to become still and silent until every drop had been drained of the blackness flowing inside us.

I—and you—now understood: We would be pulled back into the flowing blackness only when we had done all the damage we were allowed to do, only when our work was done. The work of you against me... and me against you.

2

On Friday morning the homicide detectives were sitting in their unmarked car just down the street from the gun shop where once upon a time I had planned to pick up a few things. The store was supposed to open at ten o'clock, but they arrived a half-hour early. There they were, sipping coffees and lackadaisically eyeing whatever came into their field of vision. I was sitting—unseeable—in the back seat, thinking to myself, ‘Do you really think that I'm going to make an

appearance to pick up my order? You guys are either very thorough or very stupid.'

Then Detective White said something that put me in my place. 'You know we're wasting our time here, don't you?'

'Yup,' said Detective Black. 'No way he's going to show up.'

'You know why the lieutenant ordered this stakeout, don't you?'

'Yup. It's not like this is the first time.'

'But it still stinks.'

'Take it easy. Here, have a bagel,' said Detective Black as he reached into a paper bag.

Detective White took the bagel and tore into it like an angry dog. 'This isn't the place we should be. We should be questioning those execs at the company, with or without their lawyers.'

'That's not what the lieutenant wants.'

'That not what he wants because he got the word.'

'The word from the man who got the word from the man,' said Detective Black.

'You know how many people have stopped showing up for work at that place?'

'I know.'

'I'd like to have a talk with the ones that are still left,' said Detective White as his full set of remarkably square teeth tore off another hunk of bagel, and he continued to talk with his mouth full. 'They're the ones who know what's going on. I don't like it when people tell me that I shouldn't try to find out what's really going on.'

'You know the score,' said Detective Black. 'That's a big company. What's going on there is probably not good for

their business.'

'They should let us do our job.'

'I agree.'

'People should know what really goes on in this city,' said Detective White.

'I'd like to know myself sometimes. But what can you do?'

'Nothing.'

'Want another bagel?' said Detective Black as he helped himself to one of the poppy-seed variety.

Detective White waved off seconds on the bagels and continued gazing lackadaisically through the windshield of the unmarked car.

If I hadn't already known what I knew about certain things, I might have thought to myself, 'You guys are...'

'All right, then,' said Richard to his gathered underlings in the usual meeting place. He had already tried to contact Chipman, both at home and at work, but he didn't seem surprised at the young man's absence. But what could he say to the others about Chipman, not to mention the empty chairs once occupied by Sherry and Harry? Come on, Richard, tell them what you know about Domino. Tell *me* what you know. Like Detective White, I wanted to know what was going on.

Mary and Kerrie were sitting to the left and right of Richard, while Barry had positioned himself at the far end of the table.

'Why don't you move in a little closer, Barry boy?' said Richard.

Covering her mouth, Mary whispered, 'He smells really bad, Richard. I think he's sick.'

‘I'm, uh, fine where I am,’ said Barry. And that ended the issue.

‘So where do we go from here, Rich?’ said a cocky Kerrie.

Richard eyed Kerrie as if she were a talking whippet, which in fact she resembled, and then spoke softly to her. ‘You should probably be taking this situation more seriously, Kerrie.’

‘I have no fear whatever of Frank Dominio. I just *wish* he'd try something with me. I'm ready,’ she said, patting a slight bulge in the pocket of the sport coat she wore every day with a T-shirt, jeans, and athletic shoes.

‘I'm afraid I can't say the same,’ said Mary. ‘Is there any point in bringing up the others who couldn't be with us today?’

‘None at all, Mary,’ said Richard with a business-like finality. ‘What about you, Barry? Any apprehensions at your end of the table?’

Barry just stared without any focus like a lobotomy case. Then he sniffed, actually snorted, very loudly and scratched his armpit. He was clearly having a hard time following the proceedings. One—and that one would be me—might say that Barry was no longer his old brilliant self.

‘Then what's the point of this meeting?’ said Mary, her mask of make-up shining with perspiration. ‘Everything, all our plans… what I mean to say is, it's over… isn't it?’

‘It's not over until it's over,’ spoke Richard. ‘The important thing is to maintain appearances. None of us has anything to hide.’

‘Oh, come on,’ said Kerrie. ‘Frank's out there doing us one by one. But we did *him* first.’

‘We certainly didn't do any violence to him,’ said Richard. ‘We just wanted something that he had.’

‘And once we got that—what? You're The Doctor, Richard. We know what that means.’

Richard sighed with infinite boredom. ‘Is anyone here going to back Kerrie up in her accusations?’

Mary bit her lower lip, smearing her upper teeth with a layer of lipstick. Barry continued to scratch and sniff-snort. I still wanted Richard to tell them what he knew about Domino, but it was now obvious that this was not going to happen. The whole point of that meeting was damage control for Richard. And he knew, as I did, that the damage wasn't over.

3

My taste for the Grotesque was neither an inborn nor a longstanding trait of my character. Rather, it was conceived and developed over the period of time encompassed by this document, my Ultimate Statement. By Friday—the last Friday of October—this taste, which was already as ripe as the fruits of an autumn harvest, had finally gone thoroughly rotten. It was now an unslakeable hunger for unheard-of horrors, for all the derangements bred by the most morbid fevers, and for the stuff of nightmares so twisted, so aberrant, that they were beyond the comprehension or recall of the waking mind. Please let me show you—all of you—what I did that day. It began with—

Barry

Actually I had intended Barry, rather than Perry, as my first project, given that this waddling wretch had been

Richard's primary tool in my decline and fall at the company. However, good sense overcame vengeful rage, and I decided to begin practising on the piano player—whose annihilation may now be seen to have been a simple finger exercise compared to my later work—while saving the more choice subjects for later, when I had reached the height of my monstrous powers. Nevertheless, Barry remained a side-project for me from the beginning. His slow wit and strong odor at the meeting on Friday were merely superficial signs that this swine was ready for the market.

Barry left the office well before lunch. He no longer felt comfortable in such structured—correction, *restructured*—surroundings. All he wanted was to get back to his brick house (no house of straw or clay for this piggy), where things were just the way he now liked them.

As he drove his car through a winding route of city streets—he was no longer mentally competent to handle the high speeds and quick thinking required to maneuver on the expressway—the only thoughts in his head were images of home. (This place, to describe it with a minimum of foul details, was a sty... literally.) These images which now filled Barry's beasty brain, since his ability to think in words and concepts had almost entirely atrophied, consisted wholly of wallowing in filth, which included the remains of the filth that he heaped *into* his body as well as the filth that emanated out of that same body and was spread over every inch of his floor and furnishings. Barry's brick bungalow was truly hog heaven. And he could hardly wait to strip off his human clothes and roll his flabby, naked flesh around in the slop, snorting and squealing all the while.

But Barry's mind was not yet so intellectually impaired that he couldn't make a few stops at the drive-though windows of several fast-food joints on his way home, filling both the front and back seats of his car with bags and bags of burgers, tacos, and crusty hunks of fried chicken. It was at his last stop (a rib shack!) that Barry caught the scent of something else that tantalized his tastes, although it was not something he could eat.

It so happened that Barry's drive home led him directly past the state fairgrounds, which were now in the full swing of a fall exhibition that included a midway of concession stands bursting with corn dogs and cotton candy, an amphitheater that filled the air with country music, and the usual showing of agricultural products from both field and barnyard. This was Barry's lucky day... and mine. Without thinking twice, or even once, Barry pulled his car into the fairground's parking lot, and, after gobbling a bag or so of sustenance, he wandered into the festive world of the fair. He was following that overpowering scent and, in his blind search, he disappeared into the crowd... disappeared forever.

The only hint of what might have become of Barry Edwins was an item that appeared the next day in the city's major newspaper and was reprinted in several other publications in outstate regions. The facts were these:

First: Someone reported to the police who were keeping order at the state fair that she had seen a naked man trying to couple with a prize pig featured at a livestock exhibition.

Second: When the police arrived at the exhibition, that nasty, naked man was nowhere to be found. What they did find, however, was a rape in progress... but it was the act of a pinkish hog upon a blue-ribbon sow.

Third: No one could be found who would claim the offending hog as theirs. One old livestock breeder did note that the genitalia of the hog, while quite small, were still intact. That is, this was an animal that had not been properly fixed for its breed and ultimate purpose.

Last: Granted permission by the police to do what needed to be done (in exchange for taking ownership of this rather fine specimen of its type), the old livestock breeder castrated the animal on the spot in order to bring it under control and promised that, by and by, this handsome hog would find a home at a good slaughterhouse.

To commemorate this turn of events I directed a—blech!—email message to Richard's computer under the subject line of, what else, WORK NOT DONE. But I was denied the satisfaction of seeing Richard read this message. In fact, I seemed to have lost the ability to locate him altogether. This was something that threw a scare into me. Because there was only one place that he could have hidden himself from my view. Somehow Richard had gone into a dark spot, but I couldn't be sure why or how this had happened. Hadn't I always been given free rein to do my work? Never mind, I told myself, there was other work to be done. And there she was—

Mary

After the mess that the cleaning staff found in Sherry Mercer's office, Mary tried to spend as little time as possible in her own… or anywhere else in the company's office space if she could help it. Her heels were now clicking upon the sidewalks of downtown toward her favorite lunch spot,

which would be filled with a crowd of people among whom she would feel relatively safe.

However, as—not *luck* but I—would have it, Mary walked right by her destination. And she kept on walking toward the outskirts of the business section of the city, wandering through rundown neighborhoods and past many of my once favorite ruined buildings (including an old place that still had a sign in the window that read: 'Rooms for Men'). But my feeling for these places was a thing of the past for me. The soothingness of *sabi*, with its mind-clearing desolation and soul-calming decrepitude, had now been replaced by my taste for the Grotesque. Nothing but the Grotesque would gratify my howling mind and poisoned soul. Only the Grotesque.

So I took Mary out of the range of vast empty fields and beautifully gutted buildings, dropping her off at a place known as The Mechanic Street Museum. This nominal 'museum' was spread out along a block of abandoned houses not far from a railroad overpass and across the road from a dumping ground for old sofas and chairs, old tires, old medicine cabinets, and any other expired object you cared to name. The exhibits of the museum consisted entirely of old dolls and mannikins, or the various parts of same. These human simulations inhabited both the interior spaces of each abandoned house as well as populating their front yards. Behind any given window, often shattered, of the houses along this section of Mechanic Street, one might see an entire mannikin—sometimes clothed or partially clothed and sometimes not—or at least part of a mannikin, such as a slim forearm and hand held in place by some putty on the inside window sill. Additionally, these windows might display a

doll hanging by its neck as if from a gibbet, or simply the head of a doll dangling at the end of a wire.

This community of dolls and mannikins also lounged upon the wooden porches, or the steps leading up to these porches, and sometimes peered out from the exposed crawlspaces beneath a number of the abandoned houses. Most interesting were the dolls and mannikins that had been set up in old chairs or sofas taken from the dumping ground across the street. The dolls leaned crookedly in chairs that were invariably too large for them, while the mannikins lay in twisted postures upon sofas without cushions. No one had ever claimed credit for creating this museum, which had attained modest renown in both local publications and nationally distributed art journals. Nor had anyone ever been caught, though many had tried, in the act of augmenting its exhibitions, filling the Mechanic Street houses and their yards with still more dolls and mannikins and replacing the ones that had become too damaged, either by vandals or the elements, to remain on display.

As I earlier explained, Mary Dreller had been led astray into the region of The Mechanic Street Museum while on her way to an out-of-office lunch. No one at the company noticed that she had not logged off her computer, and it was assumed that she, not unlike Barry Edwins, had left work early that Friday. It wasn't until later the same night that her husband reported her to the police as a missing person. The police, of course, would never find Mary but I will tell you—whoever you are or think you are—just who did find her and where she was found.

It was a few hours after sunset (EDT) that a couple of derelicts, both of them drunken and deranged, were passing

through The Mechanic Street Museum. They had covered this ground before and were not daunted by its peculiar aspects. Quite the opposite, in fact. Pausing in front of a house where a doll's head stared from a high attic window, the derelicts parked themselves on either side of a sofa near the sidewalk. Between them was a fully clothed mannikin sitting up with fair posture, although her head was twisted over the back of the sofa. Out of all the mannikins these derelicts had ever seen loitering in the vicinity, this one came closest to something that could be mistaken for a human being.

'Must be a new one,' said the first derelict.

'Yeah,' said the other. 'But—uuurrp—look it her face.'

As drunken and deranged as the derelicts were, even they could not overlook the flaw in this window dummy. Specifically, its face did not display the requisite expression of bland beatitude but, on the contrary, was severely contorted—the face of something that was frozen in a moment of panic.

'I bet we could get something for these clothes,' said the first derelict, running his dirty hands from top to bottom over the mannikin's body. 'It's got stockings even.'

'Let's take off her clothes,' said the other.

As the derelicts proceeded to undress the mannikin, they were further amazed that it was outfitted with undercloth-ing. The first derelict started talking to the dummy, calling her Daisy, and then the other derelict joined in the fantasy. One thing led to another... and by the time Daisy was fully rid of her clothes, the derelicts had laid this fake lady of the evening across the sofa and began taking turns on top of her. That night there was a full moon over Mechanic Street and these derelicts were evidently in the mood for a little mess-ing around, even if their object of desire was merely a man-

nikin, although one that might be easily mistaken, as she had been for years, for a human being.

Then one of the derelicts suddenly jumped off the dummy, stumbling backward with his pants around his ankles. 'Her eyes,' he said. 'They… they were looking back at me.'

The other derelict, zipping himself up, stepped closer to the thing spread out on the cushionless sofa. 'Oh, my god,' he groaned.

Then both of the derelicts, having pushed the mannikin onto the sidewalk, began stomping on her face and assaulting her body with a piece of metal pipe that was lying on the ground nearby. What they found inside the mannikin turned out to be even more distressing to them than her contorted face or her eyes that looked back into theirs. For beneath its plaster exterior was an anatomically correct set of bodily organs, even if they too seemed to be made of artificial materials. If the derelicts had had the presence of mind, or any useful minds at all, they might have rationalized this horrific figure as a construct intended for use in the medical school at the university, which was only a few miles away. Instead they kept pummeling away at the unnatural thing, especially its face, until nothing remained but a heap of shattered plaster. They even left its clothes behind as they broke into a breathless, stumbling flight from The Mechanic Street Museum.

While the episode with Mary was quite a success, if somewhat lacking in imagination (I had already used the mannikin theme in dispatching Perry Stokowski), the satisfaction I derived from its grotesquerie was undermined by my continuing failure to locate Richard. I had always intended him

to be the last of The Seven upon whom I would visit my wrath. Now I was beginning to worry that something was wrong. Visions of a doctor with great white gloves were beginning to disturb my—let's admit it—hopelessly disturbed mind. I left a message of WORK NOT DONE on the voice mail of both his home phone and his cell phone. But Richard was not picking up my communications, I could tell. Forget it, I told myself. You—and you was me—should be turning your attention to the penultimate person on the list—

Kerrie

I found her sometime after midnight. She was parking her car in front of a club that—big surprise—catered to patrons of sadomasochistic impulses.

The club, which displayed no sign to betray its name or nature, was located in the warehouse district not far from the river and was set up in a battered old building that I once might have looked upon as a ruin suitable for my meditations and my camera. But this building was alight with a hazy red glow, a private place halfway along a pitted road without streetlamps and under a sky that, for me in any case, was filled only with those dark constellations which put a black-out on all the stars above. And after my self-designed run-in with Kerrie, the sky would become even darker.

Despite the sadomasochistic rationale for the club's existence, its decor had nothing of the oubliette about it, nothing at all to distinguish it as a palace of pain and humiliation. Some paper pumpkins and skulls had been strung over a small bar in anticipation of the upcoming All Hallows, although in every other respect it resembled an old-fashioned

neighborhood saloon. Like the company where I was once employed, the owner of this operation was obviously dedicated to the standard business principle of offering his clientele the least (a few tables and chairs, some wobbly stools along the bar) for the most (a sky-high cover charge and outrageously priced drinks from the bottom of their respective barrels). Even this purported haven for the deviant, the outsider, functioned along the mainstream goal of commerce, always aiming for the fiscal ideal of everything for them, the sellers and sellers-out of the world, and zero for… well, everyone was 'them' to me now, at least in the sense that neither corporate nor even *corporeal* dealings were any longer my business.

Or so I told myself, even though the whole picture was not mine to see… and somewhere in the darkness of that October night, Richard was still hiding from me in some dark spot where I could not find him, as I had so easily tracked down Kerrie to this hole-in-the-wall hangout. And I needed to find him—to finish up my work—before everything became for me one great world of darkness. Yet I continued to believe that my calculations were correct—the damage that was given to me to do was compounded at a fixed rate. And there remained enough principal in my account of worldly existence for me to complete the task I had started—none of The Seven (or myself) would ever see another sunrise; none of us would reclaim that hour which had been stolen by the daylight savings of the previous spring and was not scheduled to be returned for approximately another twenty-four hours or so. But what was an hour… a day… a year or ten? There's always plenty of time for the worst. Everyone is old enough to face their fate.

And so was Kerrie Keene.

She had just walked in the door, carrying in one hand a leather bag that was not a purse. Wearing her usual outfit, she swaggered toward the far end of the bar and leaned over to ask the barman, 'Is The Can here yet?'

'He's waiting for you downstairs,' said the barman as he tossed Kerrie a key dangling at the end of a red plastic disc.

Kerrie immediately strode toward a curtained doorway that led downstairs, which was a complex of rooms set up like a subterranean motel... and a very cheap motel at that. After moving down several hallways, turning left here and right there without the least hesitation, she stopped at a certain door and let herself in.

On the other side was a small bare room that appeared in the same light of garish red that illuminated the bar upstairs and the corridors below. In the shadows of one corner of the room a short, flabby man was on his knees with lowered head, as if he were praying. He didn't even look up when Kerrie stormed into the room and slammed the door behind her. And he didn't look up when Kerrie threw her leather bag on the floor and stripped off her sport coat, revealing two skinny arms springing forth from a sleeveless T-shirt.

'Hello, Can,' she said to the man in the corner, who still did not raise his eyes to her. 'I've brought something special for you tonight.'

'Can,' I already knew from previous research (I had always been thorough in my work), was a pseudonym that to Kerrie, and to most of those around the SM scene, was short for Human Garbage Can. But before Kerrie could begin making use of this living receptacle, packing it full of that special sort of offal she had brought with her this night, she realized

something was wrong: The Can seemed to have gone stiff as a statue. None of the usual words of worship and submission that Kerrie was accustomed to hearing at this point in the ritual were uttered by the short, flabby, and naked man. She walked across the floor and laid several slaps, both backhand and forehand, on The Can's pudgy face. But there was no response from the figure still postured as though in silent prayer.

Then the door opened, and I walked into the room in all my black attire, including a zippered leather mask over my face.

‘You've got the wrong room, Masked Man. Take a walk.’

The Masked Man stood heroically mute and perfectly rigid, staring at Kerrie through a pair of eye-holes with thick, almost surgical, stitching around them. Then he reached into his coat pocket and took out something small and circular, tossing it into Kerrie's hands. The second she realized it was a fresh roll of stamps, she moved toward her sport coat that had made a clunk when she first threw it on the floor. The Masked Man was quicker than Kerrie and pushed her against the wall, being careful not to push too hard, before she could retrieve her weapon. Then The Masked Man moved with all speed and pulled the firearm from Kerrie's jacket.

It was a Glock.

And it felt so fine in my fingers as I clicked off the safety and aimed the barrel at Kerrie's head. She had pressed her body flush against the cinder-block wall, standing as if before a firing squad. This was how I had originally imagined my work would be done. If it hadn't been for… paper? I was sick of having my mind harassed by paper moons and paper

plates, paper products of all kinds both figurative and literal. Why couldn't I break through those dark spots and remember? Everything could have been so much easier, so much quicker, and far less grotesque for everyone concerned if things had only gone according to plan. Even now I was tempted to install the full magazine of the gun into Kerrie's body and leave it at that. But I already had other plans in place. I had been thorough, as always, in my research.

'Do you know why he's called The Can?' I asked Kerrie.

'Go to hell. Why don't you just shoot?'

'I asked you if you knew, *really* knew, why he's called The Can?'

'He pretends he's a garbage can. He eats... he eats whatever you put in his mouth. He swallows it and begs for more.'

'Do me a favor and move a little closer to Mr Can,' I said, directing her toward the paralyzed figure in the corner. 'Closer still, Kerrie. Right up against his body, as if you were riding him piggy-back. There, that's close enough.'

'Close enough for what?' she asked, a satisfying quiver of fear in her voice.

Then I set my plans in motion... and her body began to sink down into his. She struggled. She even screamed. But this was not a place where screams were taken seriously at first. Besides, the door was heavy, and it was locked. I continued my conversation with Kerrie as a monologue, since she was sinking fast into the flabby man's flesh and had begun choking on her own horror.

'You're right about Mr Can. He does eat whatever you, or someone like you, puts in his mouth. But he also eats other things. He's not just a garbage can, Kerrie. What you never

knew about Mr Can is that not only does he have a secret life that he lives out in places like this. He also has a *secret* secret life that he would never have told you about. By night he's the human garbage can you know but probably do not love. In an even darker night of his soul, Mr Can is... he's, well there's just no subtle way I can say this. He's a cannibal. And soon you're going to be made one with him—your brain buried inside of his brain, your nervous system integrated into his, and your desires bound to his desires. Unfortunately you will be denied all muscular control. You'll exist something like a parasitic organism inside him. A tapeworm if you like. But he won't be bothered by you. He'll continue to eat as you've always known him to eat. And you will know that you are eating the same things. He will also eat as you never knew him to eat. There are others like him, and he is in league with them. Mostly they consume homeless persons who have fallen unnoticed by the wayside. Sometimes they give them a little help in their going. On rare occasions they eat living food. Are you aware of the word that cannibals who once occupied islands in the South Pacific used for “human being?” It translates as “the food that talks”. Mr Can and others of his kind live to eat. I know that was never your style, Kerrie, but from now on it will be... as long as Mr Can lives. And you know what: he's even made special preparations with his fellow cannibals for the day when he will be too dead to chew his food. It seems to be their desire, don't ask me why, that after their demise they be buried naked in secret ground. After their life of eating is over, their final wish is to become food for other forms of life. It's rather spiritual, don't you think? The great circle of being and all that. Of course, just because Mr Can is dead doesn't necessar-

ily mean that you'll join him. You're so much younger, so much healthier—even given your anorexic mania—than he is. I'm guessing that the little parasite inside him will outlive his body by a certain term, although I can't say how long that will be. Can you still hear me, Kerrie? You're sliding down into him so fast. It's almost as if you can't wait to get inside. Prick up your ears if you'd like to hear more.'

But she was gone. And so was I.

'Wake up, Mr Can,' I said to the man in the corner just before I left the room.

4

After leaving Kerrie and Mr Can behind in that shed-like room, I sent out my last message to Richard (WORK NOT DONE, in case you forgot), using every possible means of communication, including the barking dog in the backyard next to Richard's house, some writing in chalky deodorant on his bathroom mirror, and even telepathy, which I knew from the beginning of this whole heinous saga was not a strength of mine. But once again I failed to raise him by wireless means. And I still could not locate his position on my radar.

The streets outside were now so death-darkened that I could no longer make my way on foot. Even when I switched to travelling by means of spectral byways, at which I had become so adept, I found that I was no longer master of these roads. All the routes that were familiar to me seemed to have changed, mostly into a series of dead-ends. I felt as if I were trying to negotiate a maze that was not taking me where I wanted to go but where it wanted me to go. And when I finally reached what I thought was the way to freedom, I dis-

covered that I was still not outside the maze but at its very center. And that center was the old meeting room which was outside company space, even if it was deep inside the world of Richard the Minotaur.

I reassumed worldly appearances and opened the door to the room. While always dim, the place had never looked dimmer to my eyes than it did at that moment. Nevertheless, I ventured across the floor of the room in corporate form. I walked to the table in corporate form. And in corporate form I took a seat at that table where, at the opposite end, sat Richard.

'I'm glad you made it here,' he said.

'I don't think I had much choice.'

'But this is where you want to be. Nothing else really matters any more.'

'I'm glad you're resigned to the facts.'

'You mean because you're here to do some terrible deed?'

'My very worst,' I said, although not as convincingly as I would have liked.

'Your worst, I'm sure. All because I made you feel bad. That really proves it—you haven't learned anything. And after what you've been through.'

'Illusions don't die that easily. Whatever I've learned doesn't really matter. I'm still Domino as long as you exist.'

'You mean as long as *you* exist.'

'That's right. You said that you knew I wasn't a dead man.'

'Oh, that was just some simple detective work.'

'Then why wasn't it done by the real detectives?'

'Because they didn't know what I knew. They had you down from the start as a suspect in Perry's... Before I forget

—why the mannikin hands? That was fairly crude.'

'I thought it appropriate. What's the difference? All right, I didn't know how far I could take things at the time. Now tell me what it was the detectives didn't know.'

'It was an assumption they made. Considering what happened to Perry, they naturally felt you were up and around in the usual manner of mad-dog murderers. How could they know that this was rather far from the case? When they ran the check on your credit card purchases the day you were... the day you resigned, they quite reasonably focused on your visit to the gun shop. They didn't consider it important that you later picked up a few things at that office supply store, although they did ask me if I thought this was significant. But I just shrugged like an innocent.'

I must have given Richard the blankest look in the world when he started talking about the office supply store. I remembered buying the guns; I remembered buying the clothes. I remembered suddenly being back in my apartment that night—how confused I was, and how I was in such a terrible funk because I didn't know whether I was alive or dead. I didn't think I had the strength to pick up a piece of paper... and the idea of paper left a chilling echo in my mind.

'Do you see now? You weren't able to remember buying those reams of paper,' Richard continued. 'It's strange how some things are just blocked from your brain.'

'What would you know about that?'

'Not as much as you, I'm sure. But I do have your interest now, don't I? So you're going to listen to me crow about how I deduced what became of little Domino.'

'I don't have to listen to anything,' I said, pulling my Buck Skinner Hunting Knife from my pocket and laying it on the

table.

‘Wow. That *is* a real hand-chopper. There are some people I'd like to use that on myself. Do you think you're the only one who has scores to settle? It's not a question of whether the punishment fits the crime, is it? Not to swines like us. It's just a matter of getting that pain out of your system… and into someone else's. It's a dark world. Nothing but darkness. And whose business is it but our own what goes on in the dark?’

I wanted to be calm and menacing. I wanted to be a creature of murder-lust, a monster of all madnesses. I wanted to do things to Richard that would make the sun grow cold with horror. But I couldn't help following his script. ‘Naturally I have my confusions about what I am, what I became. But I didn't expect to find myself wondering what on earth *you* are.’

‘Me?’ said Richard. ‘I'm a person just like you. Well, not exactly like you. You're a miracle man. You didn't know that. A medical marvel. As I was saying, once your presence at the office supply store was established, it only remained to check out in the local papers if anything else of interest had happened around those corners that night.’

As Richard spoke these words a deafening sound came into my head. The sound of crashing and crunching, of metal and bone and screams and screams and screams. Then the sound of a roaring black river.

‘It was a bus, Frank. The last of the line for the night. The driver was fully exonerated, if you care to know. You ran like a big black bird right in front of him, as several eye-witnesses told the officers at the scene. You were literally mashed to a pulp, completely unrecognizable as a human be-

ing, let alone anyone in particular... especially since you weren't carrying any identification on your person. That wasn't very smart.'

'Then I *am* a dead man,' I said aloud to myself.

'Everyone who saw that gruesome accident thought you were. Some of them said they didn't know which was worse—seeing your body all smeared and twisted in ways no one should have to see... or finding out that you were still alive. Comatose, but alive. I visited you a few times. Of course there wasn't—I'm sorry, i*s*n't—anything to see but a heap of bandages. And a rather small heap at that, blood pooling through the gauze. But the fascinating part was the brain waves you were putting out on the EEG. Before I got there, they didn't think there was any point in hooking you up to it. But I can play a pretty convincing medicine man when I want to. I told them I was a specialist and that I'd known cases like this before. You should have seen the look on their faces when that monitor started skipping and jumping all over the place. That was when I knew you were going to be a problem for me.'

'How could you know that?'

'That's a strange question coming from you, Domino. I might just as well ask how you knew how to do the things you did. I'm not requesting details. I heard Chipman's voice when he described Sherry Mercer's office. He saw something in there that I *never* want to know about. And that's not even considering what became of the young man himself. It was bad enough getting those "work not done" messages whenever another one of the group seemed to just disappear. But I knew what I was getting myself into when I hired you. You and the rest of them. But it was you, Frank. You were

the blackest of the bunch. I could see it in you from the start. Believe me, I know all about it. We—all of us—are the darkness that dreams are made on. I'm not claiming that I'm special in any way. It doesn't take anything more than a pair of clear eyes to see what makes the world go ‘round. I've known about it since I was a child. Was it my fault that I liked to stare into the shadows until they started to stare back into me? That I performed little operations on stray animals? I really did want to be a doctor at that time in my life. But when I put my hands inside those creatures I never expected to feel what was really in there. It wasn't until I was older that I knew what I had felt inside them was also inside of me—that there wasn't anything else inside except that darkness. I thought about killing myself... but that wasn't the way for me. It had other plans for my life, and there wasn't much I could do except carry them out. It's my kind that calls the shots in this world, but we didn't ask for the job. Most of the time we think we're making our own agendas, following assignments that come from our own brains... or “from above”, almost never from below, except perhaps in those strictly legendary instances wherein some poor boob thinks he's made himself a deal with the devil. What a load of crap that is. I'm not looking for your sympathy, Frank. Wouldn't that be deranged? I just wanted you to know that I have some idea of what you've been up to, not to mention up against, these past few days. It was strange what happened with you, but I don't think it was an accident. Most people have no idea what goes on in this world. But you know what it likes. It likes fear and agitation and conflict and all that stuff that makes such good copy for those folks who are selling that sort of thing—never mind all the sideliners

whose happy lot is merely to peek in the window of the torture shop of life. I wanted you to know that I knew about that too. That's all I had to say. So what now?'

'I've gotten very good lately at coming up with fates worse than death. How about one of those?' I said. But my words sounded hollow even to me. I was still afraid, not of Richard himself, but of what was inside him, of what had been using him, and myself, as such obliging organisms for the most vicious and sinister acts.

'You can do whatever you want to me, sure,' he said. 'But unless I'm completely out of touch with things, you just barely made it here. And you're looking at me as if I'm standing in a black fog. Do you think you can do what you want to me and still make it to your next stop? That's where all of this is really heading for you, isn't it? Come on, you can't lie to me.'

He was right of course. I couldn't lie to him. But I didn't think I needed to lie.

'I believe you're right, Richard. What happened to me wasn't an accident. And it won't be over until my allotted body count is tallied up. There were seven of you.'

'Correct. And it was seven that you took. You didn't think about Chipman, did you? He never made much of an impression on anyone. But he was the joker I planted in the deck. If you waste the last bit of light you have left on me you'll never make it to where you want to go. It's a terrible choice you have to make. I'm sure you'd like to step into the blackness inside me and dance around in it with that big knife of yours. That's the real bad guy, and we both know it. That black stuff. But what can we do about it? We're just pictures painted on the darkness. Go and save yourself, Domino, if

saving yourself still means anything to you. To tell you the truth, I'm fed up with the whole thing. You can do whatever you want.'

I suspected that Richard's words were only part of an act to save himself. I was sure of it when he asked me, 'By the way, whatever happened to that document of your idea, your special plan? Just out of curiosity. I don't really expect to see it.'

I was in a position that was frustrating beyond endurance. The worst of the swine was the one I had to let go. It seemed I had truly been beaten while he would continue to flourish.

'I'll tell you this, Richard. Keep watch on your computer screen. I'll send you something soon.'

Having said that, I put my knife back in my pocket and began my crawl along the lines of darkness that would lead me to only one place, one little room.

5

There he was, that bundle of bleeding bandages. The EEG was still active, portraying alarming surges of brain activity and glowing with an eerie incandescence. It was only by the colored lights of the medical appliances in that room that I could see anything at all. He looked like a mummy of someone whose every limb had been amputated to some extent. Tubes trailed out of a bandaged stump that had once been a whole arm as well as from the wrappings which suggested a shapeless head beneath. A catheter snaked its way from under a blanket, dribbling into a plastic bag hung on the side of the bed.

At the nurses' station down the quiet hallway there was a bulletin board which had pinned to it some newspaper clippings that pertained to this patient: the initial accident report (with a diagram), the investigation into the driving record of the guy at the wheel of that bus, the awful revelation that the victim still lived despite the incredible trauma sustained during the mishap, and a 'search goes on' piece that put out a call to anyone who might be able to provide information that could identify the man who lay in a coma at Memorial Hospital. The bent frames of a pair of wire-rimmed eyeglasses that might have belonged to the unknown man had been found some distance from his body, but the lenses had either popped out or were lost among the shattered debris of the accident.

And you were right, Richard. It was not an accident at all. As I looked down on that remnant of a human body I was finally able to remember what happened.

Rushing back to the office supply store to collect my forgotten packs of paper, I was very much preoccupied with the statement, my Ultimate Statement, that would eventually blacken those empty pages and eject them from the printer in my apartment. But the substance of this document still remained confused in my mind, its message frail and without force, its theme trite: 'They made me feel bad,' to paraphrase your own words, Richard, 'so I bought some guns and killed them all.' Such a statement, no matter how detailed and lengthy, simply would not do. I realized that even as I was running down the sidewalk to make it back to the office supply store before it closed. And I also knew that no words of greater weight or reason would occur to me once I had returned home. In a fraction of a second I became sick with

the idea of sitting before my computer screen and tapping the same message over and over with only the slightest variations on the theme of 'they made me feel bad, so I bought some guns and killed them all'. There was nothing in such a statement except self-humiliation, self-ridicule, and self-indictment. Anyone reading it would have thought, 'What a worthless piece of human wreckage. And what a shame about those seven people.' There would have been no salvation for me in making such a statement, in committing such an act.

But then I saw my salvation speeding down the street in the form of a bus headed for the suburbs. I picked up my pace. I raced toward the only salvation that I knew was available to me. And I timed it perfectly.

By killing myself I felt that I would also be killing all of you, killing every bad body on this earth. To my mind, at that moment, every swinish one of us in this puppet show of a world would be done with when that bus made contact with me. Every suicide is a homicide—or many homicides—thwarted. My rage, my inner empire of murderous hate, had never been so intense as in those moments before I met that oncoming bus. Soon my statement would be made, not with words but with the violent action which is the only thing anyone really attended to, if only for a day or so. And the theme of my statement: 'To whom it may concern—I hereby refuse to be a swine living in a world of swine that was built by swine and belongs only to swine. This swine has been fed full of his swinish ambitions, his swinish schemes, and, over and above all, his swinish fears and obsessions. Therefore I forfeit my part of this estate to my heirs in the kingdom of the swine.'

That would seem to have been the end of it. I never suspected that I was going to be put to further use. I never suspected that there was a grander—if not exactly 'grand'—scheme of things. Not for a moment did I consider that I would continue to be manipulated and conspired against... that I would become the instrument of greater manipulations and conspiracies, all the while being kept in the dark about what was really going on, about what should have been the real subject of my Ultimate Statement, as I now attempt to deliver it to you, not one of whom will ever benefit from it. People do not know, and cannot face, the things that go on in this world, the secret nightmares that are suffered by millions every day... and the excruciating paradox, the nightmarish obscenity of being something that does not know what it is and yet believes that it does know, something that in fact is nothing but a tiny particle that forms the body of The Great Black Swine Which Wallows in a Great River of Blackness that to us looks like sunrises and skyscrapers, like all the knotted events of the past and the unraveling of these knots in the future, like birthdays and funerals, like satellites and cell phones and rockets launched into space, like nations and peoples, like the laws of nature and the laws of humanity, like families and friends, like everything, including these words that I write. Because this document, this supposedly Ultimate Statement, is only a record of incidents destined for the garbage can of the incredible. And rightly so. These incidents are essentially no different from any others in the world: they occurred in a particular sequence, they were witnessed and sometimes documented, but in the end they have no significance, no sense,

no meaning, at least as I—and you and you and you—imagine these vacuous concepts.

All that remains to me, to my comatose body lying in a darkened hospital room, is to put an end to the thing beneath all those bandages. I'm sure that I'll be allowed to do so. My work is finally done. Yet having gone to all the trouble to concoct this statement, I cannot resist the ludicrous temptation to throw it out to the crowd. I told Richard I would send him something on his computer, although it won't be the documentation for a New Product idea, which I destroyed in both its digital and hard-copy forms. And whatever satisfaction it may bring Detectives White and Black, I will also forward a copy to them, so that they can match the fingerprints on the handle of this knife I hold over my own body to those that wait for them in my apartment... and so that they may know something of the atrocious wonders of this world. On Monday morning all the printers in the company will be spewing out these useless pages. Perhaps this occurrence will bring on the bad publicity which those merchants of stale information, those data pushers, so anxiously desire to avoid, since the company is now struggling for its life in the corporate arena. I am now struggling for my death. That's the only thing that matters.

I do not regret having annihilated seven persons any more than the fact that I'll never regain that lost hour which was taken from me six months ago. I make no excuses for my acts, and I beg no forgiveness or reprieve for the lives I've eliminated.

A curse on *them*.

These are the words of a swine who seeks only his own slaughter under the slicing, serrated blade of a Buck Skinner

Hunting Knife.

A curse on *me*.

I was weak and afraid… and I ended up as a deadly weapon wielded by a dark hand that not even I—that no one—will ever see.

A curse on it.

I remember how wonderful it felt to die the little death of that cockroach in my apartment. I can only hope to know that feeling to its fullest when the moment comes and the river rushes in to drown me in its blackness. Perhaps a swine whose savage work is finally done may be allowed this much. I cannot wait to tear into the tender flesh of my last victim, and with a single slash kill two.

I cannot wait to be dead. I cannot wait.

I am not afraid any more.

My Case For Retributive Action (2007 Teatro Grottesco Version)

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It was my first day working as a processor of forms in a storefront office. As soon as I entered the place—before I had a chance to close the door behind me or take a single step inside—this rachitic individual wearing mismatched clothes and eyeglasses with frames far too small for his balding head came hopping around his desk to greet me. He spoke excitedly, his words tumbling over themselves, saying, 'Welcome, welcome. I'm Ribello. Allow me, if you will, to help you get your bearings around here. Sorry there's no coat rack or anything. You can just use that empty desk.'

Now, I think you've known me long enough, my friend, to realize that I'm anything but a snob or someone who by temperament carries around a superior attitude toward others, if for no other reason than that I simply lack the surplus energy required for that sort of behavior. So I smiled and tried to introduce myself. But Ribello continued to inundate me with his patter. 'Did you bring what they told you?' he asked, glancing down at the briefcase hanging from my right hand. 'We have to provide our own supplies around here, I'm sure you were told that much,' he continued before I could get a word in. Then he turned his head slightly to

sneak a glance around the storefront office, which consisted of eight desks, only half of them occupied, surrounded by towering rows of filing cabinets that came within a few feet of the ceiling. ‘And don't make any plans for lunch,’ he said. ‘I'm going to take you someplace. There are some things you might want to know. Information, anecdotes. There's one particular anecdote… but we'll let that wait. You'll need to get your bearings around here.’

Ribello then made sure I knew which desk I'd been assigned, pointing out the one closest to the window of the storefront office. ‘That used to be my desk. Now that you're with us I can move to one of the desks farther back.’ Anticipating Ribello's next query, I told him that I had already received instructions regarding my tasks, which consisted entirely of processing various forms for the Quine Organization, a company whose interests and activities penetrate into every enterprise, both public and private, on this side of the border. Its headquarters are located far from the town where I secured a job working for them, a drab outpost, one might call it, that's even quite distant from any of the company's regional centers of operation. In such a place, and many others like it, the Quine Organization also maintains offices, even if they are just dingy storefront affairs permeated by a sour, briny odor. This smell could not be ignored and led me to speculate that before this building had been taken over as a facility for processing various forms relating to the monopolist Q. Org, as it is often called for shorthand, it had long been occupied by a pickle shop. You might be interested to know that this speculation was later confirmed by Ribello, who had taken it upon himself to help me get my bearings in

my new job, which was also my first job since arriving in this little two-street town.

As I sat down at my desk, where a lofty stack of forms stood waiting to be processed, I tried to put my encounter with Ribello out of my head. I was very much on edge for reasons that you well know (my nervous condition and so forth), but in addition I was suffering from a lack of proper rest. A large part of the blame for my deprivation of sleep could be attributed to the woman who ran the apartment house where I lived in a single room on the top floor. For weeks I'd been pleading with her to do something about the noises that came from the space underneath the roof of the building, which was directly above the ceiling of my room. This was a quite small room made that much smaller because one side of it was steeply slanted in parallel to the slanted roof above. I didn't want to come out and say to the woman that there were mice or some other kind of vermin living under the roof of the building which she ran, but that was my implication when I told her about the 'noises.' In fact, these noises suggested something far more sizeable, and somehow less identifiable, than a pack of run-of-the-mill vermin. She kept telling me that the problem would be seen to, although it never was. Finally, on the morning which was supposed to be the first day of my new job—after several weeks of struggling with inadequate sleep in addition to the agitations deriving from my nervous condition—I thought I would just make an end of it right there in that one-room apartment on the top floor of a building in a two-street town on the opposite side of the border from the place where I had lived my whole life and to where it seemed I would never be able to return. For the longest time I sat on the edge

of my bed holding a bottle of nerve medicine, shifting it from one hand to the other and thinking, ‘When I stop shifting this bottle back and forth—an action that seemed to be occurring without the intervention or control of my own mind—if I find myself holding it in my left hand I'll swallow the entire contents and make an end of it, and if I find myself holding it in my right hand I'll go and start working in a storefront office for the Quine Organization.’

I don't actually recall in which hand the bottle ended up, or whether I dropped it on the floor in passing it from hand to hand, or what in the world happened. All I know is that I turned up at that storefront office, and, as soon as I stepped inside, Ribello was all over me with his nonsense about how he would help me get my bearings. And now, while I was processing forms one after another like a machine, I also had to anticipate going to lunch with this individual. None of the other three persons in the office—two middle-aged men and an elderly woman who sat in the far corner—had exercised the least presumption toward me, as had Ribello, whom I already regarded as an unendurable person. I credited the others for their consideration and sensitivity, but of course there might have been any number of reasons why they left me alone that morning. I remember that the doctor who was treating both you and me, and whom I take it you are still seeing, was fond of saying, as if in wise counsel, ‘However much you may believe otherwise, nothing in this world is unendurable—nothing.’ If he hadn't gotten me to believe that, I might have been more circumspect about him and wouldn't be in the position I am today, exiled on this side of the border where fogs configure themselves with an

astonishing regularity. These fogs are thick and gray; they crawl down my throat and all but cut off my breathing.

Throughout that morning I tried to process as many forms as possible, if only to keep my mind off the whole state of affairs that made up my existence, added to which was having to go to lunch with Ribello. I had brought along something to eat, something that would keep in my briefcase without going rotten too soon. And for some hours the need to consume these few items I had stored in my briefcase was acutely affecting me, yet Ribello gave no sign that he was ready to take me to this eating place he had in mind. I didn't know exactly what time it was, since there wasn't a clock in the office and none of the others seemed to have taken a break for lunch, or anything else for that matter. But I was beginning to feel light-headed and anxious. Even more than food, I needed the medication that I had left behind in my one-room apartment.

Outside the front window I couldn't see what was going on in the street due to an especially dense fog that formed sometime around mid-morning and hung about the town for the rest of the day. I had almost finished processing all the forms that were on my desk, which was far more work than I had initially calculated I would be able to accomplish in a single day. When there were only a few forms left, the elderly woman who sat in the corner shuffled over to me with a new stack that was twice the size of the first, letting them fall on my desk with a thump. I watched her limp back to her place in the corner, her breath now audibly labored from the effort of carrying such a weighty pile of forms. While I was turned in my seat, I saw Ribello smiling and nodding at me as he pointed at his wristwatch. Then he pulled out a

coat from underneath his desk. It seemed that it was finally time for us to go to lunch, although none of the others budged or blinked as we walked past them and left the office through a back door that Ribello pointed me toward.

Outside was a narrow alley which ran behind the storefront office and adjacent structures. As soon as we were out of the building I asked Ribello the time, but his only reply was, 'We'll have to hurry if we want to get there before closing.' Eventually I found that it was almost the end of the working day, or what I would have considered to be such. 'The hours are irregular,' Ribello informed me as we rushed down the alley. There the back walls of various structures stood on one side and high wooden fences on the other, the fog hugging close to both of them.

'What do you mean, irregular?' I said.

'Did I say irregular? I meant to say indefinite,' he replied. 'There's always a great deal of work to be done. I'm sure the others were as glad to see you arrive this morning as I was, even if they didn't show it. We're perpetually shorthanded. All right, here we are,' said Ribello as he guided me toward an alley door with a light dimly glowing above it.

It was a small place, not much larger than my apartment, with only a few tables. There were no customers other than ourselves, and most of the lights had been turned off. 'You're still open, aren't you?' said Ribello to a man in a dirty apron who looked as if he hadn't shaved for several days.

'Soon we close,' the man said. 'You sit there.'

We sat where we were told to sit, and in short order a woman brought two cups of coffee, slamming them in front of us on the table. I looked at Ribello and saw him pulling a sandwich wrapped in wax paper out of his coat pocket.

‘Didn't you bring your lunch?’ he said. I told him that I thought we were going to a place that served food. ‘No, it's just a coffeehouse,’ Ribello said as he bit into his sandwich. ‘But that's all right. The coffee here is very strong. After drinking a cup you won't have any appetite at all. And you'll be ready to face all those forms that Erma hauled over to your desk. I thought she was going to drop dead for sure.’

‘I don't drink coffee,’ I said. ‘It makes me—’ I didn't want to say that coffee made me terribly nervous, you understand. So I just said that it didn't agree with me.

Ribello set down his sandwich for a moment and stared at me. ‘Oh dear,’ he said, running a hand over his balding head.

‘What's wrong?’

‘Hatcher didn't drink coffee.’

‘Who is Hatcher?’

Taking up his sandwich once again, Ribello continued eating while he spoke. ‘Hatcher was the employee you were hired to replace. That's the anecdote I wanted to relate to you in private. About him. Now it seems I might be doing more harm than good. I really did want to help you get your bearings.’

‘Nevertheless,’ I said as I watched Ribello finish off his sandwich.

Ribello wiped his hands together to shake free the crumbs clinging to them. He adjusted the undersized eyeglasses which seemed as if they might slip off his face at any moment. Then he took out a pack of cigarettes. Although he didn't offer me any of his sandwich, he did offer me a cigarette.

‘I don't smoke,’ I told him.

‘You should, especially if you don't drink coffee. Hatcher smoked, but his brand of cigarettes was very mild. I don't suppose it really matters, your not being a smoker, since they don't allow us to smoke in the office anymore. We received a memo from headquarters. They said that the smoke got into the forms. I don't know why that should make any difference.’

‘What about the pickle smell?’ I said.

‘For some reason they don't mind that.’

‘Why don't you just go out into the alley to smoke?’

‘Too much work to do. Every minute counts. We're short-handed as it is. We've always been short-handed, but the work still has to get done. They never explained to you about the working hours?’

I was hesitant to reveal that I had gotten my position not by applying to the company, but through the influence of my doctor, who is the only doctor in this two-street town. He wrote down the address of the storefront office for me on his prescription pad, as if the job with Q. Org were another type of medication he was using to treat me. I was suspicious, especially after what happened with the doctor who treated us both for so long. His therapy, as you know from my previous correspondence, was to put me on a train that traveled clear across the country and over the border. This was supposed to help me overcome my dread of straying too far from my own home, and perhaps effect a breakthrough with all the other fears accompanying my nervous condition. I told him that I couldn't possibly endure such a venture, but he only repeated his ridiculous maxim that nothing in the world is unendurable. To make things worse, he wouldn't allow me to bring along any medication, although of course I did. But

this didn't help me in the least, not when I was traveling through the mountains with only bottomless gorges on either side of the train tracks and an infinite sky above. In those moments, which were eternal I assure you, I had no location in the universe, nothing to grasp for that minimum of security which every creature needs merely to exist without suffering from the sensation that everything is spinning ever faster on a cosmic carousel with only endless blackness at the edge of that wheeling ride. I know that your condition differs from mine, and therefore you have no means by which to fully comprehend my ordeals, just as I cannot fully comprehend yours. But I do acknowledge that both our conditions are unendurable, despite the doctor's second-hand platitude that nothing in this world is unendurable. I've even come to believe that the world itself, by its very nature, is unendurable. It's only our responses to this fact that deviate: mine being predominantly a response of passive terror approaching absolute panic; yours being predominantly a response of gruesome obsessions that you fear you might act upon. When the train that the doctor put me on finally made its first stop outside of this two-street town across the border, I swore that I would kill myself rather than make the return trip. Fortunately, or so it seemed at the time, I soon found a doctor who treated my state of severe disorientation and acute panic. He also assisted me in attaining a visa and working papers. Thus, after considering the matter, I ultimately told Ribello that my reference for the position in the storefront office had in fact come from my doctor.

‘That explains it, then,’ he said.

‘Explains what?’

‘All doctors work for the Quine Organization. Sooner or later he would have brought you in. That's how Hatcher was brought in. But he couldn't persevere. He couldn't take the fact that we were short-handed and that we would always be short-handed. And when he found out about the indefinite hours… well, he exploded right in the office.’

‘He had a breakdown?’ I said.

‘I suppose you could call it that. One day he just jumped up from his desk and started ranting about how we were always short-handed… and the indefinite hours. Then he became violent, turning over several of the empty desks in the office and shouting, “We won't be needing these.” He also pulled out some file drawers, throwing their contents all over the place. Finally he started tearing up the forms, ones that hadn't yet been processed. That's when Pilsen intervened.’

‘Which one is he?’

‘The large man with the mustache who sits at the back of the office. Pilsen grabbed Hatcher and tossed him into the street. That was it for Hatcher. Within a few days he was officially dismissed from the company. I processed the form myself. There was no going back for him. He was completely ruined,’ said Ribello as he took a sip of coffee and then lit another cigarette.

‘I don't understand. How was he ruined?’ I said.

‘It didn't happen all at once,’ explained Ribello. ‘These things never do. I told you that Hatcher was a cigarette smoker. Very mild cigarettes that he special-ordered. Well, one day he went to the store where he purchased his cigarettes and was told that the particular brand he used, which

was the only brand he could tolerate, was no longer available.'

'Not exactly the end of the world,' I said.

'No, not in itself,' said Ribello. 'But that was just the beginning. The same thing that happened with his cigarettes was repeated when he tried to acquire certain foods he needed for his special diet. Those were also no longer available. Worst of all, none of his medications were in stock anywhere in town, or so he was told. Hatcher required a whole shelf of pharmaceuticals to keep him going, far more than anyone else I've ever known. Most important to him were the medications he took to control his phobias. He especially suffered from a severe case of arachnophobia. I remember one day in the office when he noticed a spider making its way across the ceiling. He was always on the lookout for even the tiniest of spiders. He practically became hysterical, insisting that one of us exterminate the spider or he would stop processing forms. He had us crawling around on top of the filing cabinets trying to get at the little creature. After Pilsen finally caught the thing and killed it, Hatcher demanded to see its dead body and to have it thrown out into the street. We even had to call in exterminators, at the company's expense, before Hatcher would return to work. But after he was dismissed from the company, Hatcher was unable to procure any of the old medications that had allowed him to keep his phobias relatively in check. Of course the doctor was no help to him, since all doctors are also employees of Q. Org.'

'What about doctors on the other side of the border?' I said. 'Do they also work for the company?'

‘I'm not sure,’ said Ribello. ‘It could be. In any case, I saw Hatcher while I was on my way to the office one day. I asked him how he was getting along, even though he was obviously a complete wreck, almost totally ruined. He did say that he was receiving some kind of treatment for his phobias from an old woman who lived at the edge of town. He didn't specify the nature of this treatment, and since I was in a hurry to get to the office I didn't inquire about it. Later I heard that the old woman, who was known to make concoctions out of various herbs and plants, was treating Hatcher's arachnophobia with a medicine of sorts which she distilled from spider venom.’

‘A homeopathic remedy of sorts,’ I said.

‘Perhaps,’ said Ribello in a distant tone of voice.

At this point the unshaven man came over to the table and told us that he was closing for the day. Since Ribello had invited me to lunch, such as it was, I assumed that he would pay for the coffee, especially since I hadn't taken a sip of mine. But I noted that he put down on the table only enough money for himself, and so I was forced to do the same. Then, just before we turned to leave, he reached for my untouched cup and quickly gulped down its contents. ‘No sense in it going to waste,’ he said.

Walking back to the office through the narrow, fog-strewn alley, I prompted Ribello for whatever else he could tell me about the man whose position in the storefront office I had been hired to fill. His response, however, was less than enlightening and seemed to wander into realms of hearsay and rumor. Ribello himself never saw Hatcher again after their meeting in the street. In fact, it was around this time that Hatcher seemed to disappear entirely—the culmination,

in Ribello's view, of the man's ruin. Afterward a number of stories circulated around town that seemed relevant to Hatcher's case, however bizarre they may have been. No doubt others aside from Ribello were aware of the treatments Hatcher had been taking from the old woman living on the edge of town. This seemed to provide the basis for the strange anecdotes which were being spread about, most of them originating among children and given little credence by the average citizen. Prevalent among these anecdotes were sightings of a 'spider thing' about the size of a cat. This fabulous creature was purportedly seen by numerous children as they played in the streets and back alleys of the town. They called it the 'nobby monster,' the source of this childish phrase being that, added to the creature's resemblance to a monstrous spider, it also displayed a knob-like protrusion from its body that looked very much like a human head. This aspect of the story was confirmed by a few older persons whose testimony was invariably dismissed as the product of the medications that had been prescribed for them, even though practically everyone in town could be discredited for the same reason, since they were all—that is, we were all—taking one kind of drug or another in order to keep functioning in a normal manner. There came a time, however, when sightings of the so-called nobby monster ceased altogether, both among children and older, heavily medicated persons. Nor was Hatcher ever again seen around town.

'He just abandoned his apartment, taking nothing with him,' said Ribello just as we reached the alley door of the office. 'I believe he lived somewhere near you, perhaps even in the same building. I hear that the woman who ran the apart-

ment house wasn't put out at all by Hatcher's disappearance, since he was always demanding that she accommodate his phobias by bringing in exterminators at least once a week.'

I held the door open for Ribello but he didn't take a step toward the building. 'Oh no,' he said. 'My work's done for the day. I'm going home to get some sleep. We have to rest sometime if we're to process the company's forms at an efficient pace. But I'll be seeing you soon.'

After a few moments Ribello could no longer be seen at all through the fog. I went back inside the office, my mind fixed on only one thing: the items of food stashed within my briefcase. But I wasn't two steps inside when I was cornered by Pilsen near the lavatory. 'What did Ribello say to you?' he said. 'It was about the Hatcher business, wasn't it?'

'We just went out for a cup of coffee,' I said, for some reason concerned to keep Ribello's confidence.

'But you didn't bring your lunch. You've been working all day, and you haven't had anything to eat. It's practically dark now, your first day on the job. And Ribello doesn't make sure you take your lunch?'

'How do you know we didn't go somewhere to eat?'

'Ribello only goes to that one place,' Pilsen said. 'And it doesn't serve food.'

'Well, I admit it. We went to the place that doesn't serve food, and now I'm famished. So if I could just return to my desk...'

But Pilsen, a large man with a large mustache, grabbed the collar of my coat and pulled me back toward the lavatory.

'What did Ribello say about the Hatcher business?'

'Why don't you ask him?'

‘Because he's a congenital liar. It's a sickness with him—one of many. You see how he dresses, how he looks. He's a lunatic, even if he is a very good worker. But whatever he told you about Hatcher is completely false.’

‘Some of it did sound far-fetched,’ I said, now caught between the confidences of Ribello, who may have been no more than a congenital liar, and Pilsen, who was a large man and probably someone I didn't want to offend.

‘Far-fetched is right,’ said Pilsen. ‘The fact is that Hatcher was promoted to work in one of the company's regional centers. He may even have moved on to company headquarters by now. He was very ambitious.’

‘Then there's nothing to say. I appreciate your straightening me out concerning this Hatcher business. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to go back to my desk. I'm really very hungry.’

Pilsen didn't say another word, but he watched me as I walked to my desk. And I felt that he continued to watch me from his place at the back of the office. As I ate the few items of food I kept in my briefcase, I also made it quite conspicuous that I was processing forms at the same time, not lagging behind in my work. Nevertheless, I wasn't sure that this ferocious display of form processing was even necessary, as Ribello had implied was the case, due to the monumental quantity of work we needed to accomplish with a perpetually short-handed staff. I wondered if Pilsen wasn't right about Ribello. Specifically, I wondered if Ribello's assertion that our working schedule was ‘indefinite’ had any truth to it. Yet several more hours passed and still no one, except Ribello, had gone home since I arrived at the office early that morning. Finally I heard one of the three persons sitting be-

hind me stand up from his, or possibly her, desk. Moments later, Pilsen walked past me wearing his coat. He was also carrying a large briefcase, so I surmised that he was leaving for the day—it was now evening—when he exited the office through the front door. After waiting a short while, I did the same.

I had walked only a block or so from the storefront office when I saw Ribello heading toward me. He was now wearing a different set of mismatched clothes. 'You're leaving already?' he said when he stopped in front of me on the sidewalk.

'I thought you were going home to get some sleep,' I said.

'I did go home, and I did get some sleep. Now I'm going back to work.'

'I talked to Pilsen, or rather he talked to me.'

'I see,' said Ribello. 'I see very well. And I suppose he asked what I might have said about Hatcher.'

'In fact he did,' I said.

'He told you that everything I said was just nonsense, that I was some kind of confirmed malcontent who made up stories that showed the company in a bad light.'

'Something along those lines,' I said.

'That's just what he would say.'

'Why is that?'

'Because he's a company spy. He doesn't want you hearing what's what on your first day. Most of all he doesn't want you to hear about Hatcher. He was the one who informed on Hatcher and started the whole thing. He was the one who ruined Hatcher. That old woman I told you about who lives on the edge of town: she works for the company's chemical division, and Pilsen keeps an eye on her too. I heard from

someone who works at one of the regional centers that the old woman was assigned to one of the company's biggest projects—a line of drugs that would treat very specific disorders, such as Hatcher's arachnophobia. It would have made Q. Org twice the company it is today, and on both sides of the border. But there was a problem.'

'I don't think I want to hear any more.'

'You should hear this. The old woman was almost taken off the company payroll because she was using more than just her esoteric knowledge of herbs and plants. The chemical engineers at company headquarters gave her detailed instructions to come up with variations on their basic formula. But she was moving in another direction entirely and following completely unsanctioned practices, primarily those of an occult nature.'

'You said she was almost taken off the company payroll.'

'That's right. They blamed her for Hatcher's disappearance. Hatcher was very important to them as an experimental subject. Everything was set up to make him a guinea pig—denying him his usual brand of cigarettes, taking him off his special diet and his medications. They went to a great deal of trouble. Hatcher was being cleansed for what the old woman, along with the company's chemical engineers, intended to put into him. The spider venom made some kind of sense. But, as I said, the old woman was also following practices that weren't sanctioned by the company. And they needed someone to blame for Hatcher's disappearance. That's why she was almost taken off the payroll.'

'So Hatcher was an experiment,' I said.

'That's what happens when you explode the way he did, ranting about the unending workload we were expected to

handle and how the company always left us short-handed. The question remains, however. Was the Hatcher experiment a success or a failure?'

Ribello then looked at his wristwatch and said that we would talk further about Hatcher, the Quine Organization, and a host of other matters he wanted to share with me. 'I was so glad to see you walk into the office this morning. We have so many forms to process. So I'll be seeing you in, what, a few hours or so?' Without waiting for my response, Ribello rushed down the sidewalk toward the storefront office.

When I reached the door to my one-room apartment, everything within me was screaming out for sleep and medication. But I paused when I heard footsteps moving toward me from the end of the dim hallway. It was the woman who operated the apartment house, and she was carrying in her arms what looked like a bundle of dirty linen.

'Cobwebs,' she said without my asking her. She turned and pointed her head back toward a set of stairs down the hallway, the kind of pull-down steps that lead up to an attic. 'We do keep our houses clean here, no matter what some people from across the border may think. It's quite a job but at least I've made a start.'

I couldn't help but stare in silence at the incredible wadding of cobwebs the woman bore in her arms as she began to make her way downstairs. Some vague thoughts occurred to me, and I called to the woman. 'If you're finished for the time being I can put up those stairs to the attic.'

'That's good of you, thanks,' she shouted up the stairwell. 'I'll bring in the exterminator soon, just as you asked. I don't know exactly what's up there but I'm sure it's more than I can deal with myself.'

I understood what she meant only after I ascended into the attic and saw for myself what she had seen. At the top of the stairs there was only a single lightbulb which didn't begin to illuminate those vast and shadowed spaces. What I did see were the dead bodies, or parts of bodies, of more than a few rats. Some of these creatures looked as if they had escaped from just the sort of thick, heaping cobwebs which I had seen the woman who ran the apartment house carrying in her arms. They clung to the bodies of the rodents just as the dense, gray fog clung to everything in this town. Furthermore, all of these bodies seemed to be in a state of deformity... or perhaps transition. When I looked closely at them I could see that, in addition to the four legs normally allowed them by nature, there were also four other legs that had begun sprouting from their undersides. Whatever had killed these vermin had also begun to change them.

But not all of the affected rodents had died or been partially eaten. Later investigations I made into the attic, once I had persuaded the woman who ran the apartment house to defer calling in the exterminator, revealed rats and other vermin with physical changes even more advanced. These changes explained the indefinable noises I had heard since moving into my one-room apartment just beneath the roof of the building, with the attic between.

Some of the things I saw had eight legs of equal length and were able to negotiate the walls of the attic and even crawl across the slanted ceiling just under the roof. Others had even begun making webs of their own. I think you would have recognized much of this, my friend, as something out of your own gruesome obsessions. Fortunately my own fears did not include arachnophobia, as was the case

with Hatcher. (Nonetheless, I did ingest heavy doses of my medication before proceeding into the attic.) When I finally located him in the most remote corner of the attic I saw the knob-like head of a human being protruding from the pale, puffy body of a giant spider, or spider-thing. He was in the act of injecting his own venom into another verminous citizen of the attic. As soon as his pin-point eyes noticed mine he released the creature, which squeaked away to begin its own transformation.

I couldn't imagine that Hatcher desired to continue his existence in that state. As I approached him he made no move of either aggression or flight. And when I took out the carving knife I had brought with me it seemed that he lifted his head and showed me his tiny throat. He had made his decision, just as I had made mine: I never returned to the storefront office to process forms for the Quine Organization, in whose employ are all the doctors on this side of the border... and perhaps also on your side. It is now my conviction that our own doctor has long been working for this company. At the very least I blame him for my exile to this remote, two-street town of fog and nightmares. At worst, I think it was his intention to deliver me across the border to become another slave or experimental subject for the company he serves.

I prepared two vials of the venom I extracted from Hatcher's body. The first I've already used on the doctor who has been treating me on this side of the border, even if the culmination of that treatment was to be imprisoned in a storefront office processing folders for an indefinite number of hours lasting the remainder of my indefinite existence. I'm still watching him suffer his painful mutations while I

help myself to all the medications I please from the cabinets in his office. Before morning comes I'll put him out of his misery, and his medications will put me out of mine.

The second vial I offer to you, my friend. For so long you have suffered from such gruesome obsessions which our doctor did not, or would not, alleviate. Do with this medicine what you must. Do with it what your obsessions dictate. You might even consider, at just the right moment, giving the doctor my greetings... and reminding him that nothing in this world is unendurable—nothing.

Our Temporary Supervisor (2007 Teatro Grottesco Version)

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I have sent this manuscript to your publication across the border, assuming that it ever arrives there, because I believe that the matters described in this personal anecdote have implications that should concern even those outside my homeland and beyond the influence, as far as I know, of the Quine Organization. These two entities, one of which may be designated a political entity and the other being a purely commercial entity, are very likely known to someone in your position of journalistic inquiry as all but synonymous. Therefore, on this side of the border one might as well call himself a citizen of the Quine Organization, or a Q. Org national, although I think that even someone like yourself cannot appreciate the full extent of this identity, which in my own lifetime has passed the point of identification between two separate entities and approached total assimilation of one by the other. Such a claim may seem alarmist or whimsical to those on your side of the border, where your closest neighbors—I know this—are often considered as a somewhat backward folk who inhabit small, decaying towns spread out across a low-lying landscape blanketed almost year round by dense grayish fogs. This is how the Quine Organization, which is to say in the same breath my homeland,

would deceptively present itself to the world, and this is precisely why I am anxious (for reasons that are not always explicit or punctiliously detailed) to relate my personal anecdote.

To begin with, I work in a factory situated just outside one of those small, decaying towns layered over with fogs for most of the year. The building is a nondescript, one-story structure made entirely of cinder blocks and cement. Inside is a working area that consists of a single room of floor space and a small corner office with windows of heavily frosted glass. Within the confines of this office are a few filing cabinets and a desk where the factory supervisor sits while the workers outside stand at one of several square 'assembly blocks.' Four workers are positioned, one on each side of the square blocks, their only task being the assembly, by hand, of pieces of metal which are delivered to us from another factory. No one whom I have ever asked has the least notion of the larger machinery, if in fact it is some type of machinery, for which these pieces are destined.

When I first took this job at the factory it was not my intention to work there very long, for I once possessed higher hopes for my life, although the exact nature of these hopes remained rather vague in my youthful mind. While the work was not arduous, and my fellow workers congenial enough, I did not imagine myself standing forever at my designated assembly block, fitting together pieces of metal into other pieces of metal, with a few interruptions throughout the day for breaks that were supposed to refresh our minds from the tedium of our work or for meal breaks to allow us to nourish our bodies. Somehow it never occurred to me that the nearby town where I and the others at the factory lived,

traveling to and from our jobs along the same fog-strewn road, held no higher opportunities for me or anyone else, which no doubt accounts for the vagueness, the wispy insubstantiality, of my youthful hopes.

As it happened, I had been employed at the factory only a few months when there occurred the only change that had ever disturbed its daily routine of piece-assembly, the only deviation from a ritual which had been going on for nobody knew how many years. The meaning of this digression in our working lives did not at first present any great cause for apprehension or anxiety, nothing that would require any of the factory's employees to reconsider the type or dosage of the medication which they were prescribed, since almost everyone on this side of the border, including myself, takes some kind of medication, a fact that is perhaps due in some part to an arrangement in my country whereby all doctors and pharmacists are on the payroll of the Quine Organization, a company which maintains a large chemical division.

In any case, the change of routine to which I have alluded was announced to us one day when the factory supervisor stepped out of his office and made one of his rare appearances on the floor where the rest of us stood positioned, in rather close quarters, around our designated assembly blocks. For the first time since I had taken this job, our work was called to a halt between those moments of pause when we took breaks for either mental refreshment or to nourish our bodies. Our supervisor, a Mr Frowley, was a massive individual, though not menacingly so, who moved and spoke with a lethargy that perhaps was merely a consequence of his bodily bulk, although his sluggishness might also have been caused by his medication, either as a side effect or pos-

sibly as the primary effect. Mr Frowley laboriously made his way to the central area of the factory floor and addressed us in his slow-mannered way.

‘I'm being called away on company business,’ he informed us. ‘In my absence a new supervisor will be sent to take over my duties on a temporary basis. This situation will be in place tomorrow when you come to work. I can't say how long it will last.’

He then asked if any of us had questions for him regarding what was quite a momentous occasion, even though at the time I hadn't been working at the factory long enough to comprehend its truly anomalous nature. No one had any questions for Mr Frowley, or none that they voiced, and the factory supervisor then proceeded back to his small corner office with its windows of heavily frosted glass.

Immediately following Mr Frowley's announcement that he was being called away on company business and that in the interim the factory would be managed by a temporary supervisor, there were of course a few murmurings among my fellow workers about what all of this might mean. Nothing of this sort had ever happened at the factory, according to the employees who had worked there for any substantial length of time, including a few who were approaching an age when, I presumed, they would be able to leave their jobs behind them and enter a period of well-earned retirement after spending their entire adult lives standing at the same assembly blocks and fitting together pieces of metal. By the end of the day, however, these murmurings had long died out as we filed out of the factory and began making our way along the foggy road back to our homes in town.

That night, for no reason I could name, I was unable to fall asleep, something which previously I had had no trouble doing after being on my feet all day assembling pieces of metal in the same configuration one after the other. This activity of assemblage now burdened my mind, as I tossed about in my bed, with the full weight of its repetitiousness, its endlessness, and its disconnection from any purpose I could imagine. For the first time I wondered how those metal pieces that we assembled had come to be created, my thoughts futilely attempting to pursue them to their origins in the crudest form of substance which, I assumed, had been removed from the earth and undergone some process of refinement, then taken shape in some factory, or series of factories, before they arrived at the one where I was presently employed. With an even greater sense of futility I tried to imagine where these metal pieces were delivered once we had fitted them together as we had been trained to do, my mind racing in the darkness of my room to conceive of their ultimate destination and purpose. Until that night I had never been disturbed by questions of this kind. There was no point in occupying myself with such things, since I had always possessed higher hopes for my life beyond the time I needed to serve at the factory in order to support myself. Finally I got out of bed and took an extra dose of medication. This allowed me at least a few hours of sleep before I was required to be at my job.

When we entered the factory each morning, it was normal procedure for the first man who passed through the door to switch on the cone-shaped lamps which hung down on long rods from the ceiling. Another set of lights was located inside the supervisor's office, and Mr Frowley would

switch those on himself when he came into work around the same time as the rest of us. That morning, however, no lights were on within the supervisor's office. Since this was the first day that a new supervisor was scheduled to assume Mr Frowley's duties, if only on a temporary basis, we naturally assumed that, for some reason, this person was not yet present in the factory. But when daylight shone through the fog beyond the narrow rectangular windows of the factory, which included the windows of the supervisor's office, we now began to suspect that the new supervisor—that is, our temporary supervisor—had been inside his office all along. I use the word ‘suspect’ because it simply was not possible to tell—in the absence of the office lights being switched on, with only natural daylight shining into the windows through the fog—whether or not there was someone on the other side of the heavily frosted glass that enclosed the supervisor's office. If the new supervisor that the Quine Organization had sent to fill in temporarily for Mr Frowley had in fact taken up residence in the office situated in a corner of the factory, he was not moving about in any way that would allow us to distinguish his form among the blur of shapes which could be detected through the heavily frosted glass of that room.

Even if no one said anything that specifically referred either to the new supervisor's presence or absence within the factory, I saw that nearly everyone standing around their assembly blocks had cast a glance at some point during the early hours of the day in the direction of Mr Frowley's office. The assembly block that served as my station was located closer than most to the supervisor's office, and we who were positioned there would seem to have been able to discern if

someone was in fact inside. But those of us standing around the assembly block to which I was assigned, as well as others at blocks even closer to the supervisor's office, only exchanged furtive looks among ourselves, as if we were asking one another, ‘What do you think?’ But no one could say anything with certainty, or nothing that we could express in sensible terms.

Nevertheless, all of us behaved as if that corner office were indeed occupied and conducted ourselves in the manner of employees whose actions were subject to profound scrutiny and the closest supervision. As the hours passed it became more and more apparent that the supervisor's office was being inhabited, although the nature of its new resident had become a matter for question. During the first break of the day there were words spoken among some of us to the effect that the figure behind the heavily frosted glass could not be seen to have a definite shape or to possess any kind of stable or solid form. Several of my fellow workers mentioned a dark ripple they had spied several times moving behind or within the uneven surface of the glass which enclosed the supervisor's office. But whenever their eyes came to focus on this rippling movement, they said, it would suddenly come to a stop or simply disperse like a patch of fog. By the time we took our meal break there were more observations shared, many of them in agreement about sighting a slowly shifting outline, some darkish and globulant form like a thunderhead churning in a darkened sky. To some it appeared to have no more substance than a shadow, and perhaps that's all it was, they argued, although they had to concede that this shadow was unlike any other they had seen, for at times it moved in a seemingly purposeful way, tracing

the same path over and over behind the frosted glass, as if it were a type of creature pacing about in a cage. Others swore they could discern a bodily configuration, however elusive and aberrant. They spoke only in terms of its ‘head part’ or ‘arm-protrusions,’ although even these more conventional descriptions were qualified by admissions that such quasi-anatomical components did not manifest themselves in any normal aspect inside the office. ‘It doesn't seem to be sitting behind the desk,’ one man asserted, ‘but looks more like it's sticking up from the top, sort of sideways too.’ This was something that I too had noted as I stood at my assembly block, as had the men who worked to the left and right of me. But the employee who stood directly across the block from where I was positioned, whose name was Blecher and who was younger than most of the others at the factory and perhaps no more than a few years older than I was, never spoke a single word about anything he might have seen in the supervisor's office. Moreover, he worked throughout that day with his eyes fixed upon his task of fitting together pieces of metal, his gaze locked at a downward angle, even when he moved away from the assembly block for breaks or to use the lavatory. Not once did I catch him glancing in the direction of that corner of the factory which the rest of us, as the hours dragged by, could barely keep our eyes from. Then, toward the end of the work day, when the atmosphere around the factory had been made weighty by our spoken words and unspoken thoughts, when the sense of an un-known mode of supervision hung ominously about us, as well as within us (such that I felt some inner shackles had been applied that kept both my body and my mind from

straying far from the position I occupied at that assembly block), Blecher finally broke down.

'No more,' he said as if speaking only to himself. Then he repeated these words in a louder voice and with a vehemence that suggested something of what he had been holding within himself throughout the day. 'No more!' he shouted as he moved away from the assembly block and turned to look straight at the door of the supervisor's office, which, like the office windows, was a frame of heavily frosted glass.

Blecher moved swiftly to the door of the office. Without pausing for a moment, not even to knock or in any way announce his entrance, he stormed inside the cube-shaped room and slammed the door behind him. All eyes in the factory were now fixed on the office in the corner. While we had suffered so many confusions and conflicts over the physical definition of the temporary supervisor, we had no trouble at all seeing the dark outline of Blecher behind the heavily frosted glass and could easily follow his movements. Afterward, everything happened very rapidly, and the rest of us stood as if stricken with the kind of paralysis one sometimes experiences in a dream.

At first Blecher stood rigid before the desk inside the office, but this posture lasted only for a moment. Soon he was rushing about the room as if in flight from some pursuing agency, crashing into the filing cabinets and finally falling to the floor. When he stood up again he appeared to be fending off a swarm of insects, waving his arms wildly to forestall the onslaught of a cloudy and shifting mass that hovered about him like a trembling aura. Then his body slammed hard against the frosted glass of the door, and I thought he

was going to break through. But he scrambled full about and came stumbling out of the office, pausing a second to stare at the rest of us, who were staring back at him. There was a look of derangement and incomprehension in his eyes, while his hands were shaking.

The door behind Blecher was left half open after his furious exit, but no one attempted to look inside the office. He seemed unable to move away from the place where he stood with the half-open office door only a few feet behind him. Then the door finally began to close slowly behind him, although no visible force appeared to be causing it to do so, however deliberately it moved on its hinges. A little click sounded when the door pushed back into its frame. But it was the sound of the lock being turned on the other side of the door that stirred Blecher from his frozen stance, and he went running out of the factory. Only seconds later the bell signaling the close of the work day rang with all the shrillness of an alarm, even though it was not quite time for us to leave our assembly blocks behind us.

Startled back into a fully wakened state, we exited the factory as a consolidated group, proceeding with a measured pace, unspeaking, until we had all filed out of the building. Outside there was no sign of Blecher, although I don't think that anyone expected to see him. In any case, the grayish fog was especially dense along the road leading back to town, and we could hardly see one another as we made our way home, none of us saying a word about what had happened, as if we were bound by a pact of silence. Any mention of the Blecher incident would have made it impossible, at least to my mind, to go back to the factory. And there was no other place we could turn to for our living.

That evening I went to bed early, taking a substantial dose of medication to insure that I would drop right off to sleep and not spend hour upon hour with my mind racing, as it had been the previous night, with thoughts about the origins (somewhere in the earth) and subsequent destination (at some other factory or series of factories) of the metal pieces I spent my days assembling. I awoke earlier than usual, but rather than lingering about my room, where I was likely to start thinking about the events of the day before, I went to a small diner in town which I knew would be open for breakfast at that time of the morning.

When I stepped inside the diner I saw that it was unusually crowded, the tables and booths and stools at the counter occupied for the most part by my fellow workers from the factory. For once I was glad to see these men whom I had previously considered ‘lifers’ in a job which I never intended to work at for very long, considering that I still possessed higher hopes of a vague sort for my future. I greeted a number of the others as I walked toward an unoccupied stool at the counter, but no one returned more than a nod to me, nor were they much engaged in talking with one another.

After taking a seat at the counter and ordering breakfast, I recognized the man on my right as someone who worked at the assembly block beside the one where I was positioned day after day. I was fairly sure that his name was Nohls, although I didn't use his name and simply said ‘Good morning’ to him in the quietest voice I could manage. For a moment Nohls didn't reply but simply continued to stare into the plate in front of him from which he was slowly and mechanically picking up small pieces of food with his fork and placing them into his mouth. Without turning to face

me, Nohls said, in a voice even quieter than my own had been, ‘Did you hear about Blecher?’

‘No,’ I whispered. ‘What about him?’

‘Dead,’ said Nohls.

‘Dead?’ I responded in voice that was loud enough to cause everyone else in the diner to turn and look my way. Resuming our conversation in extremely quiet tones, I asked Nohls what had happened to Blecher.

‘That rooming house where he lives. The woman who runs the place said that he was acting strange after—after he came back from work yesterday.’

Later on, Nohls informed me, Blecher didn't show up for dinner. The woman who operated the boarding house took it upon herself to check up on Blecher, who didn't answer when she knocked on his door. Concerned, she asked one of her other male residents to look in on Mr Blecher. He was found lying face down on his bed, and on the nightstand were several open containers of the various medications which he was prescribed. He hadn't consumed the entire contents of these containers but had nevertheless died of an overdose of medication. Perhaps he simply wanted to put the events of the day out of his mind and get a decent night's sleep. I had done this myself, I told Nohls.

‘Could be that's what happened,’ Nohls replied. ‘I don't suppose that anyone will ever know for sure.’

After finishing my breakfast, I kept drinking refill after refill of coffee, as I noticed others in the diner, including Nohls, were doing. We still had time before we needed to be at our jobs. Eventually, however, other patrons began to arrive and, as a group, we left for work.

When we arrived at the factory in the darkness and fog some hours before dawn, there were several other employees standing outside the door. None of them, it seemed, wanted to be the first to enter the building and switch on the lights. Only after the rest of us approached the factory did anyone go inside. It was then we found that someone had preceded us into work that morning, and had switched on the lights. His was a new face to us. He was standing in Blecher's old position, directly opposite mine at the same assembly block, and he had already done a considerable amount of work, his hands moving furiously as he fitted those small metal pieces together.

As the rest of us walked onto the floor of the factory to take position at our respective assembly blocks, almost everyone cast a suspicious eye upon the new man who was standing where Blecher used to stand and who, as I remarked, was working at a furious pace. But in fact it was only his hands that were working in a furious manner, manipulating those small pieces of metal like two large spiders spinning the same web. Otherwise he stood quite calmly and was very much a stock figure of the type of person that worked at the factory. He was attired in regulation gray work clothes that were well worn and was neither conspicuously older nor conspicuously younger than the other employees. The only quality that singled him out was the furiousness he displayed in his work, to which he gave his full attention. Even when the factory began to fill with other men in gray work clothes, almost all of whom cast a suspicious eye on the new man, he never looked up from the assembly block where he was manipulating those pieces of

metal with such intentness, such complete absorption, that he gave no notice to anyone else around him.

If the new man seemed an unsettling presence, appearing as he did the morning after Blecher had taken an overdose of medication and standing in Blecher's position directly across from me at the same assembly block, at least he served to distract us from the darkened office which was inhabited by our temporary supervisor. Whereas the day before we were wholly preoccupied with this supervisory figure, our attention was now primarily drawn to the new employee among us. And even though he filled our minds with various speculations and suspicions, the new man did not contribute to the atmosphere of nightmarish thoughts and perceptions that had caused Blecher to become entirely deranged and led him to take action in the way he did.

Of course we could forbear for just so long before someone addressed the new man about his appearance at the factory that day. Since my fellow workers who stood to the right and left of me at the assembly block were doing their best to ignore the situation, the task of probing for some answers, I felt, had fallen upon me.

‘Where are you from?’ I asked the man who stood directly across from me where Blecher once stood on his side of the assembly block.

‘The company sent me,’ the man responded in a surprisingly forthcoming and casual tone, although he didn't for a second look up from his work.

I then introduced myself and the other two men at the assembly block, who nodded and mumbled their greetings to the stranger. That was when I discovered the limitations of the new man's willingness to reveal himself.

‘No offense,’ he said. ‘But there's a lot of work that needs to be done around here.’

During our brief exchange the new man had continued to manipulate those pieces of metal before him without interruption. However, even though he kept his head angled downward, as Blecher had done for most of the previous day, I saw that he did allow his eyes to flash very quickly in the direction of the supervisor's office. Seeing that, I did not bother him any further, thinking that perhaps he would be more talkative during the upcoming break. In the meantime I let him continue his furious pace of work, which was far beyond the measure of productivity anyone else at the factory had ever attained.

Soon I observed that the men standing to the left and right of me at the assembly block were attempting to emulate the new man's style of so deftly fitting together those small metal pieces and even to compete with the incredibly productive pace at which he worked. I myself followed suit. At first our efforts were an embarrassment, our own hands fumbling to imitate the movements of his, which were so swift that our eyes could not follow them, nor our minds puzzle out a technique of working quite different from the one we had always practiced. Nevertheless, in some way unknown to us, we began to approach, if somewhat remotely, the speed and style of the new man's method of fitting together his pieces of metal. Our efforts and altered manner of working did not go unnoticed by the employees at the assembly blocks nearby. The new technique was gradually taken up and passed on to others around the factory. By the time we stopped for our first break of the day, everyone was employing the new man's methodology.

But we didn't stop working for very long. After it became obvious that the new man was not pausing for a second to join us in our scheduled break period, we all returned to our assembly blocks and continued working as furiously as we could. We surprised ourselves in the performance of what once seemed a dull and simple task, eventually rising to the level of virtuosity displayed by a man whose name we did not even know. I now looked forward to speaking to him about the change he had brought about in the factory, expecting to do so when the time came for our meal break. Yet the rest of us at the factory never anticipated the spectacle that awaited us when that time finally arrived.

For, rather than leaving his position at the assembly block during the meal break that the company had always sanctioned, the new man continued to work, consuming his meal with one hand while still assembling those metal pieces, although at a somewhat slower pace, with the other. This performance introduced the rest of us at the factory to a hitherto unknown level of virtuosity in the service of productivity. At first there was some resistance to this heightened level of dedication to our work to which the new man, without any ostentation, was leading us. But his purpose soon enough became evident. And it was simple enough: those employees who ceased working entirely during the meal break found themselves once again preoccupied, even tormented, by the troubling atmosphere that pervaded the factory, the source of which was attributed to the temporary supervisor who inhabited the office with heavily frosted windows. On the other hand, those employees who continued working at their assembly blocks seemed relatively unbothered by the images and influences which, al-

though there was no consensus as to their exact nature, had plagued everyone the day before. Thus, it wasn't long before all of us learned to consume our meals with one hand while continuing to work with the other. It goes without saying that when the time came for our last break of the day, no one budged an inch from his assembly block.

It was only when the bell rang to signal the end of the work day, sounding several hours later than we were accustomed to hearing it, that I had a chance to speak with the new employee. Once we were outside the factory, and everyone was proceeding in a state of silent exhaustion back to town, I made a point of catching up to him as he strode at a quick pace through the dense, grayish fog. I didn't mince words. ‘What's going on?’ I demanded to know.

Unexpectedly he stopped dead in his tracks and faced me, although we could barely see each other through the fog. Then I saw his head turn slightly in the direction of the factory we had left some distance behind us. ‘Listen, my friend,’ he said, his voice filled with a grave sincerity. ‘I'm not looking for trouble. I hope you're not either.’

‘Wasn't I working right along with you?’ I said. ‘Wasn't everyone?’

‘Yes. You all made a good start.’

‘So I take it you're working with the new supervisor.’

‘No,’ he said emphatically. ‘I don't know anything about that. I couldn't tell you anything about that.’

‘But you've worked under similar conditions before, isn't that true?’

‘I work for the company, just like you. The company sent me here.’

‘But something must have changed at the company,’ I said. ‘Something new is happening.’

‘Not really,’ he replied. ‘The Quine Organization is always making adjustments and refinements in the way it does business. It just took some time for it to reach you out here. You're a long way from company headquarters, or even the closest regional center.’

‘There's more of this coming, isn't there?’

‘Possibly. But there really isn't any point in discussing such things. Not if you want to continue working for the company. Not if you want to stay out of trouble.’

‘What trouble?’

‘I have to go. Please don't try to discuss this matter with me again.’

‘Are you saying that you're going to report me?’

‘No,’ he said, his eyes looking back at the factory. ‘That's not necessary these days.’

Then he turned and walked off at a quick pace into the fog.

The next morning I returned to the factory along with everyone else. We worked at an even faster rate and were even more productive. Part of this was due to the fact that the bell that signaled the end of the work day rang later than it had the day before. This lengthening of the time we spent at the factory, along with the increasingly fast rate at which we worked, became an established pattern. It wasn't long before we were allowed only a few hours away from the factory, only a few hours that belonged to us, although the only possible way we could use this time was to gain the rest we needed in order to return to the exhausting labors which the company now demanded of us.

But I had always possessed higher hopes for my life, hopes that were becoming more and more vague with each passing day. I have to resign my position at the factory. These were the words that raced through my mind as I tried to gain a few hours of rest before returning to my job. I had no idea what such a step might mean, since I had no other prospects for earning a living, and I had no money saved that would enable me to keep my room in the apartment building where I lived. In addition, the medications I required, that almost everyone on this side of the border requires to make their existence at all tolerable, were prescribed by doctors who were all employed by the Quine Organization and filled by pharmacists who also operated only at the sufferance of this company. All of that notwithstanding, I still felt that I had no choice but to resign my position at the factory.

At the end of the hallway outside my apartment there was a tiny niche in which was located a telephone for public use by the building's tenants. I would have to make my resignation using this telephone, since I couldn't imagine doing so in person. I couldn't possibly enter the office of the temporary supervisor, as Blecher had done. I couldn't go into that room enclosed by heavily frosted glass behind which I and my fellow workers had observed something that appeared in various forms and manifestations, from an indistinct shape that seemed to shift and churn like a dark cloud to something more defined that appeared to have a ‘head part’ and ‘arm-protrusions.’ Given this situation, I would use the telephone to call the closest regional center and make my resignation to the appropriate person in charge of such matters.

The telephone niche at the end of the hallway outside my apartment was so narrow that I had to enter it sideways. In the confines of that space there was barely enough room to make the necessary movements of placing coins in the telephone that hung on the wall and barely enough light to see what number one was dialing. I remember how concerned I was not to dial a wrong number and thereby lose a portion of what little money I had. After taking every possible precaution to insure that I would successfully complete my phone call, a process that seemed to take hours, I reached someone at the closest regional center operated by the company.

The phone rang so many times that I feared no one would ever answer. Finally the ringing stopped and, after a pause, I heard a barely audible voice. It sounded thin and distant.

'Quine Organization, Northwest Regional Center.'

'Yes,' I began. 'I would like to resign my position at the company,' I said.

'I'm sorry, did you say that you wanted to resign from the company? You sound so far away,' said the voice.

'Yes, I want to resign,' I shouted into the mouthpiece of the telephone. 'I want to resign. Can you hear me?'

'Yes, I can hear you. But the company is not accepting resignations at this time. I'm going to transfer you to our temporary supervisor.'

'Wait,' I said, but the transfer had been made and once again the phone began ringing so many times that I feared no one would answer.

Then the ringing stopped, although no voice came on the line. 'Hello,' I said. But all I could hear was an indistinct, though highly reverberant, noise—a low roaring sound that

alternately faded and swelled as if it were echoing through vast spaces deep within the caverns of the earth or across a clouded sky. This noise, this low and bestial roaring, affected me with a dread I could not name. I held the telephone receiver away from my ear, but the roaring noise continued to sound within my head. Then I felt the telephone quivering in my hand, pulsing like something that was alive. And when I slammed the telephone receiver back into its cradle, this quivering and pulsing sensation continued to move up my arm, passing through my body and finally reaching my brain where it became synchronized with the low roaring noise which was now growing louder and louder, confusing my thoughts into an echoing insanity and paralyzing my movements so that I could not even scream for help.

I was never sure that I had actually made that telephone call to resign my position at the company. And if in fact I did make such a call, I could never be certain that what I experienced—what I heard and felt in that telephone niche at the end of the hallway outside my apartment—in any way resembled the dreams which recurred every night after I stopped showing up for work at the factory. No amount of medication I took could prevent the nightly onset of these dreams, and no amount of medication could efface their memory from my mind. Soon enough I had taken so much medication that I didn't have a sufficient amount left to overdose my system, as Blecher had done. And since I was no longer employed, I could not afford to get my prescription refilled and thereby acquire the medication I needed to tolerate my existence. Of course I might have done away with myself in some other manner, should I have been so in-

clined. But somehow I still retained higher hopes for my life. Accordingly, I returned to see if I could get my job back at the factory. After all, hadn't the person I spoke with at the regional center told me that the Quine Organization was not accepting resignations at this time?

Of course I couldn't be sure what I had been told over the telephone, or even if I had made such a call to resign my position with the company. It wasn't until I actually walked onto the floor of the factory that I realized I still had a job there if I wanted one, for the place where I had stood for such long hours at my assembly block was unoccupied. Already attired in my gray work clothes, I walked over to the assembly block and began fitting together, at a furious pace, those small metal pieces. Without pausing in my task I looked across the assembly block at the person I had once thought of as the 'new man.'

'Welcome back,' he said in a casual voice.

'Thank you,' I replied.

'I told Mr Frowley that you would return any day now.'

For a moment I was overjoyed at the implicit news that the temporary supervisor was gone and Mr Frowley was back managing the factory. But when I looked over at his office in the corner I noticed that behind the heavily frosted glass there were no lights on, although the large-bodied outline of Mr Frowley could be distinguished sitting behind his desk. Nevertheless, he was a changed man, as I discovered soon after returning to work. No one and nothing at the factory would ever again be as it once was. We were working practically around the clock now. Some of us began to stay the night at the factory, sleeping for an hour or so in a corner before going back to work at our assembly blocks.

After returning to work I no longer suffered from the nightmares that had caused me to go running back to the factory in the first place. And yet I continued to feel, if somewhat faintly, the atmosphere of those nightmares, which was so like the atmosphere our temporary supervisor had brought to the factory. I believe that this feeling of the overseeing presence of the temporary supervisor was a calculated measure on the part of the Quine Organization, which is always making adjustments and refinements in the way it does business.

The company retained its policy of not accepting resignations. It even extended this policy at some point and would not allow retirements. We were all prescribed new medications, although I can't say exactly how many years ago that happened. No one at the factory can remember how long we've worked here, or how old we are, yet our pace and productivity continues to increase. It seems as if neither the company nor our temporary supervisor will ever be done with us. Yet we are only human beings, or at least physical beings, and one day we must die. This is the only retirement we can expect, even though none of us is looking forward to that time. For we can't keep from wondering what might come afterward—what the company could have planned for us, and the part our temporary supervisor might play in that plan. Working at a furious pace, fitting together those small pieces of metal, helps keep our minds off such things.

The Mechanical Museum (2002 The Evil Entwines Version)

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Like the rest of the world, I have spent my life searching for a way to annihilate myself. Others might prefer to characterise this more or less futile project as using such expressions as “to lose oneself,” or “to get out of oneself.” I have no objection to these variant wordings and have even called on them myself to explain what I mean by the phrase “to annihilate myself,” although these explanations are also more or less futile. To these previous explanations may be added the subjoined account, or discourse of delirium, if one prefers.

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It has been said that shrines and temples are best visited at night and during a time that is out of season. I followed this advice when I travelled to a degenerate resort town and along one of its backstreets found the place called The Mechanical Museum. At that time there seemed good reason believe that this was the kind of place I was seeking: a temple in which the services of self-annihilation were offered, or at least a shrine paying homage to the creed, the wordless dream of those who would be annihilated before it is too late. This peculiar visitation, at night and out of season, appeared to my mind as a brilliant scheme, one that I had been

working towards in so many ways throughout my life. And the manner in which this scheme presented itself was fatally persuasive.

I had already given up all hope of annihilating myself and one evening sat down at a small table in a small room to write my last words. There seemed to be no question that this would be the last room that my body would inhabit, the last time I would sit down to write my last words at that small table. Yet afterwards I had no memory of having written anything at all. I had forgotten myself for a time and when I came back to myself I saw that instead writing my last words, as I had intended, I had written only three words: The Mechanical Museum. Somewhat astonished, I knew that these words merely referred to a place I had visited as a child, a simple amusement arcade located along a backstreet in an obscure resort town that even then was on the verge of degeneration. Since that time the memory of this resort-town attraction had now and again come to my mind, and on several occasions I had even written those words, The Mechanical Museum, for one reason or another. But I had never written them in a state in which I had forgotten, or lost myself, if only for a few moments. And I had certainly never written them in a style of handwriting that was clearly not my own but that of another hand, and presumably of another self. Possibly one that had finally discovered the secret of annihilation.

Thus, when I arrived in the degenerate resort town I was under the spell of a desperate ecstasy simply to find that this place still existed, however close it may have to the brink of total degeneration. And when I found the the amusement arcade still in operation along a deserted backstreet of the

town, I was filled with faith in my scheme to visit this place as a pilgrimage to a temple or a shrine, entering its open door at night and out of season. Above that door were coloured lights that spelled out the words The Mechanical Museum. From inside I heard the sound of soft, strange music.

Alone in this dim emporium, unwatched by anyattendants, or patrons, or even by the curator of this tawdry institution, I moved from one mechanical exhibit to another amazed at how much they resembled my memory of them, or rather the dreams I had experienced over the years of this distant memory. For in those long-passed days of childhood I was barely tall enough to reach the thin slots in which I dropped a coin or two that set in motion the mechanisms within a rectangular glass case which seemed so far beyond my vision. Now I could look into those cases at eye-level, as I had always dreamed of doing. I felt all the faith in the world in the brilliance of my scheme to make this pilgrimage to The Mechanical Museum, and to proceed from one machine to another, following what I believed was a formula for deliverance that would conclude in my annihilation. Like the rest of the world I could not resist the idea that my search was almost at an end. No one can resist such an idea, least of all when it is put into our minds in the hours of the night and during a time that is out of season.

The Gravedigger

For a few moments I was allowed to be at ease in the land of the dead. For a few coins I could activate one of the machines at The Mechanical Museum and cause a cemetery to glow into pale visibility, as if illuminated by the cut-out circle of moon dangling from a thin wire in the dark dis-

tance of the phony horizon. On the other side of the machine's glass, all the sights of the toy necropolis came to life and I gazed my way into the Gravedigger's habitat.

He was positioned at the front edge of his crude and wonderful world, his back turned to my invading eyes. There was a tiny shovel in his tiny hands, and his stiff, mechanical arms moved back and forth, pitching invisible earth into the open grave at his feet, a grave that was forever in progress. Nestled in this shallow pit was a miniature coffin, a humble box without adornments. The headstone above the grave was a small ivory-coloured square fixed to the gritty ground, as were all the others. But no inscriptions could be read upon them in the pasteboard moonlight. Crooked shadows were cast by frail, leafless trees and by the thin posts of the gates which traced a twisting perimeter about the cemetery landscape.

And for a few moments I was allowed to be at ease in the land of the dead, watching the Gravedigger in a trance as his mechanical arms pumped back and forth, his shovel throwing not earth but empty air upon that coffin whose grave was not as deep as a grave should be.

Yet I lost myself in the Gravedigger's good work and felt the soft weight of dirt in my shovel's blade. I was at home beneath my moon and mindlessly at peace among a world of coffined bodies settled into the ground where I had put them forever. And forever I would be filling this final grave, eternally at burial in an eternal night, silently staring earthward in the stillness and shadows, my arms in perfect motion, my shovel swinging back and forth to bury the dead, this being the only action, the only stirring within an infinite darkness.

Then the Gravedigger froze in his movements; his pitching shovel came to a stop. For a few moments I had been allowed to be at ease in the land of the dead. But at the end the Gravedigger's head haltingly swivelled about and the mad expression carved upon his wooden face cast me forever out his mechanical paradise.

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A deep sense of loss had now been instilled within me, yet for a few seconds I had also experienced the ‘absolute loss’ of myself. Perhaps this departure of self should be viewed as a form of temporal annihilation; two minutes of my existence had been expertly buried by a vacated form of consciousness in the guise of the Gravedigger, but once he had abruptly ceased his good work, my spiritual self had been quick to rise from the dead. By the very act of digging, I had become a contented combination of both Gravedigger and corpse, yet for all my unflagging work to cover and conceal, always had the grave been far too shallow to prevent my instant resurrection.

All could do now was mourn my loss.

The Sleeper

I became as though a moth to a constant and unnecessary light. A small town was brightly lit by the descending beam from an overhead spotlight; this corner of The Mechanical Museum appeared at odds with the distant memory of my childhood visitation, and yet there was some aspect about this particular machine's melancholy streets, that seemed vaguely familiar. I had my suspicions, but to throw more light upon these I would need to be gifted darkness. Just a

few coins and the overhead beam dimmed to nothingness. Beneath the glass case lighted a sequence of occasional street-lamps, their yellow glow hardly penetrating the fresh darkness of that small, degenerate town. A mechanical moon began to rise slowly upwards by way of a steel spindle, the tiny bulbs within its glass crescent casting grotesque shadows via the manufactured branches of dark, leafless trees. These fell almost claw-like upon the walls of many dream-haunted houses.

My intruding eyes gazed through the lace curtains of one upstairs window, and the comforting glow of a night-light spread over a small single bed. Rested upon a pillow I saw the wooden countenance of an eternally sleeping child, while tiny squares of cloth blanket rose and fell with the rhythmic timings of sweet oblivion. Strings of sentiment tugged at my soul, and like some emotional marionette, I warmed until I became moulded into his mind of innocent dreams.

Identity became lost to me in one instant, and so I entered within the eternal dreams of the Sleeper. In ethereal form I wandered the dark streets of that town, revelling in the essence of past and future dream, and delighting in the lonesomeness and seclusion that now enveloped the Sleeper. The unreal world of another had become home to me, and being now able to realise this fact, I knew with certainty that a true annihilation of my former self would soon become complete.

Very swiftly all sign of memory faded to become replaced by the on-going construction of infinite possibility. I felt the coldness of the eternal night, then looked upwards to see the crescent moon moving slowly through the blackened skies.

Contentment reigned in me, so that I became invisibly escorted through these desolate streets of my new home, but always walking to the tune of my own undreamt dream. Though when the music of this dream began to seem vaguely familiar to me, I became quick to encounter the fleeting presence of unaccountable unease.

Over the unworn cobbles of narrow alleys and backstreets I roamed, elated at the escape I had made from my forgotten confines. Yet eventually I was certain I heard a soulless screaming coming from beyond the door of some long-forgotten attraction. Entering through that door beneath a sign of coloured lights, I became temporarily blinded by a sudden beam of bright, white light. When my eyes saw again, the crescent moon had descended from the blackened skies above that small town within the glass case, and the return of the spotlight made it no longer possible to peer through those lace curtains into the bedroom of the Sleeper.

All around me still played the soft, strange music of his formerly undreamt dream, but I had now filled with much hatred and envy at the thought of that eternally sleeping child and how he had betrayed me.

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I knew that anger was a useless and detrimental emotion to my search for true and lasting annihilation, for this one case of betrayal would ultimately mould with others to provide the secret of the loss I had craved for so long. A voice of silence seemed to speak through the dimness of the emporium, its unspoken words heard only within my head, and I knew that I should now aspire to become one with the spirit of the machines. For some seconds I shut my eyes,

gradually emptying my mind of the fresh venom it had generated by way of a primitive longing and despair. Just before I opened them again, I imagined I heard a summons in the form of a softly chiming bell.

The Transparent Church

A velvety darkness hung about the glass case of this machine, while a false sense of peace and belonging issued upwards before I had even paid for its services. By inserting just a few coins within its sacred slot, I was to be afforded the sight of a glass-roofed church. The sound of an unknown hymn struck up from some tiny, secreted speaker, and as my intruding eyes looked down through the glass case of the machine, and through the glass roof of the Transparent Church, I saw a congregation of mechanical figures simultaneously depart their pews, rising to sing in worship of the one who had granted their unknown lives within this mechanical paradise. Like me, each one had been summoned towards their own annihilation by the spirit-chimes of the non-existent church bell, yet these pure tones were of course heard only within the confines of their delicately tuned minds.

In the shadowy area of the chancel I saw the church organist. His hands rose and fell in precise alternation, picking out notes with all the great dexterity granted him by his eternal automation. Yet like the music and words of every unknown hymn I had ever heard, the quality came as nothing but the most depressing dirge to my ears, and I wondered about the kind of god able to derive pleasure from such an audible force of blackness.

This time I knew only the deepest discontentment, so that I concentrated with all my mind upon the automated hands of the church organist. As clearly as I could see through the glass roof of the Transparent Church, could I also see the plan of deliberate expulsion being put into practice by the organist and that untrustworthy, wooden congregation. With all my will I fought against this very novel (and cruel) method of excommunication, so that eventually I became seated before that mock musical instrument, filling the air with my twisted notes, and becoming one with the hostile brain of the organist.

But in my naivety I discovered I had played myself right into the mechanical hands of the organist; thus I had found out that my discontentment held the peculiar properties needed to indirectly bless me with a most ‘unholy’ form of annihilation and begrudged worship, for in my mind I had renounced the undoubtedly soulless god that dwelt in the heavens above this mechanical haven, and in so doing I had denied my own existence and self. For who, if not me, had so recently held the position of god-like power needed to bring life to this mechanical congregation of singing sinners? Didn't those wooden forms of chameleon allegiance live only to worship, and so worship only to live?

The hymn now came to its close, the movement of my wooden hands halting most abruptly above the mock ivory keys of the organ. With a decisive click, the interior of the Transparent Church fell once more to darkness. Yet for a while my eyes remained sightless, peering into the eternal dark of some unknown universe. And all this time my dislocated mind pondered the lesson of the silent sermon I had unconsciously been afforded.

My awareness now rose me upward to new levels via the knowledge I had successfully claimed ownership of, this lifting me high above the rank of the singing sinners; yet to my utter dismay, it also exchanged my status of loss for the reunification of self. Had the spirit of this miniature shrine, which I had deliberately visited at night and at a time out of season, contrived in such a way that I should again lose my loss?

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Once more I stood alone in the dimness of the emporium. The fact that no other patron had so far made entrance into the Mechanical Museum was a thing which both puzzled nd pleased me greatly. And yet always I knew the constant feeling that some unseen form of intelligence observed my choice of machine, perhaps intrigued by my belief that such a means could ever result in a formula that would conclude in deliverance. Walking some little way onwards, my attention became stolen by what at first appeared to be an upright miniature coffin. I peered closely through the glass case of this exhibit, quickly finding just how mistaken I was.

The Punchinello

Dipping my hand into my pocket, I took out those few coins I needed to bring the Punchinello to life. In the following second came the presence of a light to gift me easy sight of that brightly-coloured cabinet of dubious entertainment. Upon the sand-covered floor before it, sat four rows of silently watching, wooden children. Yet when Punchinello began his most violent routine, every cross-legged figure became quick to give up all pretence of innocence, clapping

their tiny wooden hands together in a shocking display of macabre delight.

My intruding eyes then fixed upon the sinister figure of Punchinello itself, and my ears filled with the corrupt laughter of children at every swipe of the wooden club held in its hand. The uniformed authority-figure it struck out at gave vent to timely cries of inhuman pain, all being perfectly synchronised with the cruel contact of the wooden club. Yet I was to lose myself in the violence of Punchinello's repeated action, so that I saw myself as a conductor of mechanised puppets, with the wooden club within my wooden hand being akin to a conductor's baton. For with every swipe I made there was a crescendo to their malign laughter, and in my head I knew they eternally mocked at all humanity by their response to this bizarre parody of our behaviour.

But still I became one with the puppet-soul of the Punchinello, revelling in its deathless quality and eternal cruelty, and sneering at the brief and pointless life of humanity. Then all I knew was the violent motion of that wooden club, so that for a few moments I became enveloped of my own swift-approaching deliverance.

Yet very abruptly the Punchinello froze in its movements; the cruel club poised forever to wound the representation of all mankind—the puppet holding extreme dominance over its own maker. Its carved head now peering upwards and into my own face, its expression was one of sneering triumph and elation, secure in the knowledge it had cast me eternally outwards of its own mechanical paradise.

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With my expulsion, I knew only desperation and a sense that the time left to complete my deliverance was swiftly running out. My thoughts ticked away to the themes of hollowness and futility, to the grimness of life and the joke that is living. Yet still I sought to find the one avenue of escape; the hidden formula that would still bring me self-annihilation before it was too late. And now I realised that the degenerate state of this resort town was in tune with the degenerate state of my own existence, so that since the initial visitation made in my youth, the shrine of Mechanical Museum had remained a sacred place, invisibly linked to me via memory and soul; thus, it had gradually extended outwards during the passing of time, and the natural weakening of my physical body had allowed its slow entrance even to that quarter.

The Mechanical Museum had now totally pervaded my being, and I had become one with the shrine of my youth—in all senses (psychological, physical, spiritual) I had now 'returned' to The Mechanical Museum, so that the owning of these departments meant my deliverance was actually down to the God-like power and mercy of the shrine itself. I prayed only that my continual worship at this shrine through the passing years (though made from a great distance) would prove to be enough for the granting of my own annihilation.

Only time would tell.

The Clocktower

In time, I began to hear the sound of ticking. I walked through the dimness of the emporium until I stood before the glass case wherein originated this sound. Inside the glass

I could see a glinting object which appeared to be some type of tower. Again, the general outline reminded me very strongly of a coffin. Hoping with all my heart, I pondered if this machine would bring to me the deliverance I had craved for so long; if it could afford me the etemal loss by some sensitive mechanism of its internal carriage. I made no delay in finding out.

For just a few coins I enveloped myself in the folds of Time itself. The sudden light of an artificial moon afforded me the sight of the Clocktower. But I became shocked to find the tower had been constructed in such a very gruesome manner, and from a building-material of such a grim type. For all that bizarre structure was made from an intricate network of tiny, fragmented, yellow-brown bones.

Yet it was the actual face of the clock which was the most intriguing part of all that strange mechanism, for I saw the indicating fingers upon it were the detached fingers of a corpse. The pointed nails of both these fingers detailed the actual time with precision, giving out the message that just five more minutes would bring the arrival of midnight. Beneath the face of this clock was a balcony of bone and a large silver chime-bell, and I also noticed that many areas were decorated with tiny wreaths of autumn leaves and miniature parodies of dying roses. Peering to the very back of the balcony, I carefully counted eleven tiny wreaths which had been nailed upon the black wood of a most foreboding, coffin-shaped door.

And so I tried to lose myself in the vision of that Clocktower, but time moved so invisibly that I could not hope to locate its momentum. So once more I resigned myself to death, with my only certainty now being that annihilation

could never be granted by a mechanism unable to provoke even the merest sign of loss. Yet with only one more minute to midnight remaining, the slow opening of the coffin-shaped door upon the balcony was to promote a fresh sense of hope and interest in me. For through that door walked a mechanised representation of a figure dressed in black, and very soon I saw the cruelly smiling countenance of Death itself.

This wooden figure was cloaked in the black shadows of its own eternity, and yet I certainly wanted no part of that false and sinister state. The time remaining to complete my deliverance was now growing very short, for held within this cruel figure's hand was a scythe in the guise of a hammer.

Then, very suddenly and inexplicably, I was to find myself stood within in a street...

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It was night, and I was standing in the street of a resort town out of season. To my ears came the sudden, startling chime of a clocktower which stood high above me—yet I instantly realised this chime was the scream of a tortured human voice. When I heard the second and third screams chime, I knew I listened to the captive souls of those having once visited the shrine of the emporium before me.

With each further scream that chimed into my ears came the further degeneration of my own physical body—and the degeneration of the resort town about me. When the tenth chime came, I instantly collapsed to the rain-damp ground of the street beneath the Clocktower, and with the eleventh I became crippled with such pain that I could no longer move.

Yet the twelfth chime never came.

After a while, the pain I knew began to filter slowly outwards from my body. Then from my position lain upon my back within the street, I gazed up towards the balcony of the Clocktower above me. The moonlight now filtered down to afford a most perfect view, but still was there no figure of malign intent staring down in hatred of me. I almost doubted there ever had been.

And then a sense of realisation, of intense elation suddenly dawned on me—I had now successfully undergone my deliverance into this mechanical paradise! The twelfth chime would not now arrive, and for all eternity I would remain lost in the world of this unknown universe, forever wandering the wonderful streets of the Mechanical Museum.

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The Coldness of the Mechanical Moon

I decided I would lose myself for a while by gazing at the moon. So I walked along the rain-damp street, gazing upwards into the cold glow of that mechanical orb which had now become so very real and beautiful to me. Now that time had finally stood still for me, I sent my silent messages back into the past and to my own question self; I spoke silent words of hope into my own questing head, and gave written clues in a style of writing that would indicate my altered existence—the deliverance I had now found.

And I loved the coldness of the mechanical moon, looking upon her almost as one may look upon a beautiful, cold, but elegant woman. She was out of reach and only there to be

admired, but gradually my love became so deep for her... so deep I would have willingly died for her.

Yet a very fateful thing was my continued obsession with the moon—since who would imagine it could ever be so cold as to betray me! For once, as I revelled in the joy of a walk through all eternity, the glow of its light suddenly went out...

And through the deathly darkness of the street I stood in, echoing with the eagerness of an evil, fresh unbound, there suddenly came to my appalled ears the sound of the twelfth chime. Then through all the dreams and thoughts I had ever had; through all the years that were past or still to come, through every beat of this scorned lover's heart, my pain-filled body and soul would do nothing but scream the eternal scream of a tortured death unending.

Purity (2007 Teatro Grottesco Version)

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We were living in a rented house, neither the first nor the last of a long succession of such places that the family inhabited throughout my childhood years. It was shortly after we had moved into this particular house that my father preached to us his philosophy of 'rented living.' He explained that it was not possible to live in any other way and that attempting to do so was the worst form of delusion. 'We must actively embrace the reality of non-ownership,' he told my mother, my sister and me, towering over us and gesturing with his heavy arms as we sat together on a rented sofa in our rented house. 'Nothing belongs to us. Everything is something that is rented out. Our very heads are filled with rented ideas passed on from one generation to the next. Wherever your thoughts finally settle is the same place that the thoughts of countless other persons have settled and have left their impression, just as the backsides of other persons have left their impression on that sofa where you are now sitting. We live in a world where every surface, every opinion or passion, everything altogether is tainted by the bodies and minds of strangers. Cooties—intellectual cooties and physical cooties from other people—are crawling all

around us and all over us at all times. There is no escaping this fact.'

Nevertheless, it was precisely this fact that my father seemed most intent on escaping during the time we spent in that house. It was an especially cootie-ridden residence in a bad neighborhood that bordered on an even worse neighborhood. The place was also slightly haunted, which was more or less the norm for the habitations my father chose to rent. Several times a year, in fact, we packed up at one place and settled into another, always keeping a considerable distance between our locations, or relocations. And every time we entered one of our newly rented houses for the first time, my father would declaim that this was a place where he could 'really get something accomplished.' Soon afterward, he would begin spending more and more time in the basement of the house, sometimes living down there for weeks on end. The rest of us were banned from any intrusion on my father's lower territories unless we had been explicitly invited to participate in some project of his. Most of the time I was the only available subject, since my mother and sister were often away on one of their 'trips,' the nature of which I was never informed of and seldom heard anything about upon their return. My father referred to these absences on the part of my mother and sister as 'unknown sabbaticals' by way of disguising his ignorance or complete lack of interest in their jaunts. None of this is to protest that I minded being left so much to myself. (Least of all did I miss my mother and her European cigarettes fouling the atmosphere around the house.) Like the rest of the family, I was adept at finding ways to occupy myself in some wholly passionate direction, never mind whether or not my passion was a rented one.

One evening in late autumn I was upstairs in my bedroom preparing myself for just such an escapade when the doorbell rang. This was, to say the least, an uncommon event for our household. At the time, my mother and sister were away on one of their sabbaticals, and my father had not emerged from his basement for many days. Thus, it seemed up to me to answer the startling sound of the doorbell, which I had not heard since we had moved into the house and could not remember hearing in any of the other rented houses in which I spent my childhood. (For some reason I had always believed that my father disconnected all the doorbells as soon as we relocated to a newly rented house.) I moved hesitantly, hoping the intruder or intruders would be gone by the time I arrived at the door. The doorbell rang again. Fortunately, and incredibly, my father had come up from the basement. I was standing in the shadows at the top of the stairs when I saw his massive form moving across the living room, stripping himself of a dirty lab coat and throwing it into a corner before he reached the front door. Naturally I thought that my father was expecting this visitor, who perhaps had something to do with his work in the basement. However, this was obviously not the case, at least as far as I could tell from my eavesdropping at the top of the stairs.

By the sound of his voice, the visitor was a young man. My father invited him into the house, speaking in a straightforward and amiable fashion that I knew was entirely forced. I wondered how long he would be able to maintain this uncharacteristic tone in conversation, for he bid the young man to have a seat in the living room where the two of them could talk ‘at leisure,’ a locution that sounded absolutely bizarre as spoken by my father.

‘As I said at the door, sir,’ the young man said, ‘I'm going around the neighborhood telling people about a very worthy organization.’

‘Citizens for Faith,’ my father cut in.

‘You've heard of our group?’

‘I can read the button pinned to the lapel of your jacket. This is sufficient to allow me to comprehend your general principles.’

‘Then perhaps you might be interested in making a donation,’ said the young man.

‘I would indeed.’

‘That's wonderful, sir.’

‘But only on the condition that you allow me to challenge these absurd principles of yours—to really put them to the test. I've actually been hoping that you, or someone like you, would come along. It's almost as if a fortuitous element of intervention brought you to this house, if I were to believe in something so preposterous.’

So ended my father's short-lived capitulation to straightforwardness and amiability.

‘Sir?’ said the young man, his brow creasing a bit with incomprehension.

‘I will explain. You have these two principles in your head, and possibly they are the only principles that are holding your head together. The first is the principle of nations, countries, the whole hullabaloo of mother lands and father lands. The second is the principle of deities. Neither of these principles has anything real about them. They are merely impurities poisoning your head. In a single phrase—Citizens for Faith—you have incorporated two of the three major principles—or impurities—that must be eliminated, com-

pletely eradicated, before our species can begin an approach to a pure conception of existence. Without pure conception, or something approaching pure conception, everything is a disaster and will continue to be a disaster.'

'I understand if you're not interested in making a donation, sir,' said the young man, at which point my father dug his hand into the right pocket of his trousers and pulled out a wad of cash that was rolled into a tube and secured with a thick rubber band. He held it up before the young man's eyes.

'This is for you, but only if you will give me a chance to take those heinous principles of yours and clean them out of your head.'

'I don't believe my faith to be something that's just in my head.'

Until this point, I thought that my father was taunting the young man for pure diversion, perhaps as a means of distracting himself from the labors in which he had been engaged so intensely over the past few days. Then I heard what to my ears was an ominous shift in my father's words, signifying his movement from the old-school iconoclast he had been playing to something desperate and unprincipled with respect to the young man.

'Please forgive me. I didn't mean to suggest that anything like that was only in your head. How could such a thing be true when I know quite well that something of the kind inhabits this very house?'

'He is in every house,' said the young man. 'He is in all places.'

'Indeed, indeed. But something like that is very much in this particular house.'

My suspicion was now that my father made reference to the haunted condition—although it barely deserved the description—of our rented house. I myself had already assisted him in a small project relevant to this condition and what its actual meaning might be, at least insofar as my father chose to explain such things. He even allowed me to keep a memento of this 'phase-one experiment,' as he called it. I was all but sure that this was the case when my father alluded to his basement.

'Basement?' said the young man.

'Yes,' said my father. 'I could show you.'

'Not in my head but in your basement,' said the young man as he attempted to clarify what my father was claiming.

'Yes, yes. Let me show you. And afterward I will make a generous donation to your group. What do you say?'

The young man did not immediately say anything, and perhaps this was the reason that my father quickly shouted out my name. I backed up a few steps and waited, then descended the stairway as if I had not been eavesdropping all along.

'This is my son,' my father said to the young man, who stood up to shake my hand. He was thin and wore a secondhand suit, just as I imagined him while I was eavesdropping at the top of the stairs. 'Daniel, this gentleman and I have some business to conduct. I want you to see that we're not disturbed.' I simply stood there as if I had every intention of obediently following these instructions. My father then turned to the young man, indicating the way to the basement. 'We won't be long.'

No doubt my presence—that is, the normality of my presence—was a factor in the young man's decision to go into the

basement. My father would have known that. He would not know, nor would he have cared, that I quietly left the house as soon as he had closed the basement door behind him and his guest. I did consider lingering for a time at the house, if only to gain some idea of what phase my father's experimentation had now entered, given that I was a participant in its early stages. However, that night I was eager to see a friend of mine who lived in the neighborhood.

To be precise, my friend did not live in the bad neighborhood where my family had rented a house but in the worse neighborhood nearby. It was only a few streets away, but this was the difference between a neighborhood where some of the houses had bars across their doors and windows and one in which there was nothing left to protect or to save or to care about in any way. It was another world altogether... a twisted paradise of danger and derangement... of crumbling houses packed extremely close together... of burned-out houses leaning toward utter extinction... of houses with black openings where once there had been doors and windows... and of empty fields over which shone a moon that was somehow different from the one seen elsewhere on this earth.

Sometimes there would be an isolated house hanging onto the edge of an open field of shadows and shattered glass. And the house would be so contorted by ruin that the possibility of its being inhabited sent the imagination swirling into a pit of black mysteries. Upon closer approach, one might observe thin, tattered bedsheets in place of curtains. Finally, after prolonged contemplation, the miracle of a soft and wavering glow would be revealed inside the house.

Not long after my family moved into a vicinity where such places were not uncommon, I found one particular house that was nothing less than the ideal of the type of residence, so to speak, I have just described. My eyes became fixed upon it, held as if they were witnessing some miraculous vision. Then one of the bedsheets that covered the front window moved slightly, and the voice of a woman called out to me as I stood teetering on the broken remnants of a sidewalk.

'Hey, you. Hey, boy. You got any money on you?'

'Some,' I replied to that powerful voice.

'Then would you do something for me?'

'What?' I asked.

'Would you go up to the store and get me some salami sticks? The long ones, not those little ones. I'll pay you when you come back.'

When I returned from the store, the woman again called out to me through the glowing bedsheets. 'Step careful on those porch stairs,' she said. 'The door's open.'

The only light inside the house emanated from a small television on a metal stand. The television faced a sofa that seemed to be occupied from end to end by a black woman of indefinite age. In her left hand was a jar of mayonnaise, and in her right hand was an uncooked hot dog, the last one from an empty package lying on the bare floor of the house. She submerged the hot dog into the mayonnaise, then pulled it out and finished it off without taking her eyes from the television. After licking away some mayonnaise from her fingers, she screwed the lid back on the jar and set it to one side on the sofa, which appeared to be the only piece of furniture in the room. I held out the salami sticks to her, and

she put some money in my hand. It was the exact amount I had paid, plus one dollar.

I could hardly believe that I was actually standing inside one of the houses I had been admiring since my family moved into the neighborhood. It was a cold night, and the house was unheated. The television must have operated on batteries, because it had no electrical cord trailing behind it. I felt as if I had crossed a great barrier to enter an outpost that had been long abandoned by the world, a place cut off from reality itself. I wanted to ask the woman if I might be allowed to curl up in some corner of that house and never again leave it. Instead, I asked if I could use the bathroom.

She stared at me silently for a moment and then reached down behind the cushions of the sofa. What she brought forth was a flashlight. She handed it to me and said, 'Use this and watch yourself. It's the second door down that hall. Not the first door—the second door. And don't fall in.'

As I walked down the hall I kept the flashlight focused on the gouged and filthy wooden floor just a few feet ahead of me. I opened the second door, not the first, then closed it behind me. The room in which I found myself was not a toilet but a large closet. Toward the back of the closet there was a hole in the floor. I shone the flashlight into the hole and saw that it led straight into the basement of the house. Down there were the pieces of a porcelain sink and commode, which must have fallen through the floor of the bathroom that was once behind the first door I had passed in the hallway. Because it was a cold night, and the house was unheated, the smell was not terribly strong. I knelt at the edge of the hole and shone the flashlight into it as far its thin beam would reach. But the only other objects I could see

were some broken bottles stuck within the strata of human waste. I thought about what other things might be in that basement… and I became lost in those thoughts.

'Hey, boy,' I heard the woman call out. 'Are you all right?'

When I returned to the front of the house, I saw that the woman had other visitors. When they held up their hands in front of their faces, I realized that I still had the shining flashlight in my hand. I switched it off and handed it back to the woman on the sofa.

'Thank you,' I said as I maneuvered my way past the others and toward the front door. Before leaving I turned to the woman and asked if I might come back to the house.

'If you like,' she said. 'Just make sure you bring me some of those salami sticks.'

That was how I came to know my friend Candy, whose house I visited many times since our first meeting on that thrilling night. On some visits, which were not always at night, she would be occupied with her business, and I would keep out of her way as a steady succession of people young and old, black and white, came and went. Other times, when Candy was not so busy, I squeezed next to her on the sofa, and we watched television together. Occasionally we talked, although our conversations were usually fairly brief and superficial, stalling out as soon as we arrived at some chasm that divided our respective lives and could not be bridged by either of us. When I told her about my mother's putrid European cigarettes, for instance, Candy had a difficult time with the idea of 'European,' or perhaps with the very word itself. Similarly, I would often be unable to supply a context from my own life that would allow me to comprehend something that Candy would casually interject as we sat watching

television together. I had been visiting her house for at least a month when, out of nowhere, Candy said to me, ‘You know, I had a little boy that was just about your age.’

‘What happened to him?’ I asked.

‘Oh, he got killed,’ she said, as if such an answer explained itself and warranted no further elaboration. I never urged Candy to expand upon this subject, but neither could I forget her words or the resigned and distant voice in which she had spoken them.

Later I found out that quite a few children had been killed in Candy's neighborhood, some of whom appeared to have been the victims of a child-murderer who had been active throughout the worst neighborhoods of the city for a number of years before my family moved there. (It was, in fact, my mother who, with outrageous insincerity, warned me about ‘some dangerous pervert’ stealthily engaged in cutting kids’ throats right and left in what she called ‘that terrible neighborhood where your friend lives.’) On the night that I left our rented house after my father had gone into the basement with the young man who was wearing a secondhand suit, I thought about this child-murderer as I walked the streets leading to Candy's house. These streets gained a more intense hold upon me after I learned about the child killings, like a nightmare that exercises a hypnotic power forcing your mind to review its images and events over and over no matter how much you want to forget them. While I was not interested in actually falling victim to a child-murderer, the threat of such a thing happening to me only deepened my fascination with those crowded houses and the narrow spaces between them, casting another shadow over the ones in which that neighborhood was already enveloped.

As I walked toward Candy's house, I kept one of my hands in the pocket of my coat where I carried something that my father had constructed to be used in the event that, to paraphrase my irrepressibly inventive parent, anyone ever tried to inflict personal harm upon me. My sister was given an identical gadget, which looked something like a fountain pen. (Father told us not to say anything about these devices to anyone, including my mother, who for her part had long ago equipped herself with self-protection in the form of a small-caliber automatic pistol.) On several occasions I had been tempted to show this instrument to Candy, but ultimately I did not break the vow of secrecy on which my father had insisted. Nevertheless, there was something else my father had given me, which I carried in a small paper bag swinging at my side, that I was excited to show Candy that night. No restrictions had been placed on disclosing this to anyone, although it probably never occurred to my father that I would ever desire to do so.

What I carried with me, contained in a squat little jar inside the paper bag, was a by-product, one might say, of the first-phase experiment in which I had assisted my father not long after we moved into our rented house. I have already mentioned that, like so many of the houses where my family lived during my childhood years, our current residence was imbued with a certain haunted aspect, however mild it may have been in this instance. Specifically, this haunting was manifested in a definite presence I sensed in the attic of the house, where I spent a great deal of time before I became a regular visitant at Candy's. As such things go, in my experience, there was nothing especially noteworthy about this presence. It seemed to be concentrated near the wooden

beams which crossed the length of the attic and from which, I imagined, some former inhabitant of the house may once have committed suicide by hanging. Such speculation, however, was of no interest to my father, who strongly objected to the possibility of spooks or spirits of any kind or even the use of these terms. ‘There is nothing in the attic,’ he explained to me. ‘It's only the way that your head is interacting with the space of that attic. There are certain fields of forces that are everywhere. And these forces, for reasons unknown to me as yet, are potentiated in some places more than others. Do you understand? The attic is not haunting your head —your head is haunting the attic. Some heads are more haunted than others, whether they are haunted by ghosts or by gods or by creatures from outer space. These are not real things. Nonetheless, they are indicative of real forces, animating and even creative forces, which your head only conceives to be some kind of spook or who knows what. You are going to help me prove this by allowing me to use my apparatus in the basement to siphon from your head that thing which you believe is haunting the attic. This siphoning will take place in a very tiny part of your head, because if I siphoned your whole head… well, never mind about that. Believe me, you won't feel a thing.’

After it was over, I no longer sensed the presence in the attic. My father had siphoned it away and contained it in a small jar, which he gave to me once he was through with it as an object of research, his first phase of experimentation in a field in which, unknown to other scientists who have since performed similar work, my father was the true Copernicus or Galileo or whomever one might care to name. However, as may be obvious by now, I did not share my father's sci-

entific temperament. And although I no longer felt the presence in the attic, I was entirely resistant to abandoning the image of someone hanging himself from the wooden beams crossing the length of a lonely attic and leaving behind him an unseen guideline to another world. Therefore, I was delighted to find that the sense of this presence was restored to me in the portable form of a small jar, which, when I cupped it tightly in my hands, conveyed into my system an even more potent sense of the supernatural than I had previously experienced in the attic. This was what I was bringing to Candy on that night in late autumn.

When I entered Candy's house, there was no business going on that might distract us from what I had to show her. There were in fact two figures slumped against the wall on the opposite side of the front room of the house, but they seemed inattentive, if not completely oblivious, to what was happening around them.

'What did you bring for Candy?' she said, looking at the paper bag I held in my hand. I sat down on the sofa beside her, and she leaned close to me.

'This is something...' I started to say as I removed the jar from the bag, holding it by its lid. Then I realized that I had no way to communicate to her what it was I had brought. It was not my intention to distress her in any way, but there was nothing I could say to prepare her. 'Now don't open it,' I said. 'Just hold it.'

'It looks like jelly,' she said as I placed the jar in her meaty hands.

Fortunately, the contents of the jar presented no disturbing images, and in the glowing light of the television they took on a rather soothing appearance. She gently closed her

grip on the little glass container as if she were aware of the precious nature of what was inside. She seemed completely unafraid, even relaxed. I had no idea what her reaction would be. I knew only that I wanted to share with her something that she could not otherwise have known in this life, just as she had shared the wonders of her house with me.

'Oh my God,' she softly exclaimed. 'I knew it. I knew that he wasn't gone from me. I knew that I wasn't alone.'

Afterward, it occurred to me that what I had witnessed was in accord with my father's assertions. Just as my head had been haunting the attic with the presence of someone who had hanged himself, Candy's head was now haunting the jar with a presence of her own design, one which was wholly unlike my own. It seemed that she wished to hold on to that jar forever. Typically, forever was about to end. A nondescript car had just pulled up and stopped in front of Candy's house. The driver quickly exited the vehicle and slammed its door behind him.

'Candy,' I said, 'There's some business coming.'

I had to tug at the jar to free it from her grasp, but she finally let it go and turned toward the door. As usual, I wandered off to one of the back rooms of the house, an empty bedroom where I liked to huddle in a corner and think about all the sleeping bodies that had dreamed there throughout innumerable nights. But on this occasion I did not huddle in a corner. Instead, I kept watch on what was happening in the front room of the house. The car outside had come to a stop too aggressively, too conspicuously, and the man in the long coat who walked toward the house moved in a way that was also too aggressive, too conspicu-

ous. He pushed open the door of Candy's house and left it open after he stepped inside.

'Where's the white kid?' said the man in the long coat.

'No white people in here,' said Candy, who held her eyes on the television. 'Not including you.'

The man walked over to the two figures across the room and gave each of them a nudge with his foot.

'If you didn't know, I'm the one who lets you do business.'

'I know who you are, Mr Police Detective. You're the one who took my boy. You took other ones too, I know that.'

'Shut up, fat lady. I'm here for the white kid.'

I took the pen out of my pocket and pulled off the top, revealing a short, thick needle like the point of a pushpin. Holding the pen at my side and out of sight, I walked back down the hallway.

'What do you want?' I said to the man in the long coat.

'I'm here to take you home, kid.'

If there was anything I had ever known in my life as a cold, abstract certainty, it was this: if I went with this man, I would not be going home.

'Catch,' I said as I threw the little jar at him.

He caught the jar with both hands, and for a moment his face flashed a smile. I have never seen a smile die so quickly or so completely. If I had blinked, I would have missed the distressed transition. The jar then seemed to jump out of his hands and onto the floor. Recovering himself, he took a step forward and grabbed me. I have no reason to think that Candy or the others in the room saw me jab the pen into his leg. What they saw was the man in the long coat releasing me and then crumbling into a motionless pile. Evidently the effect was immediate. One of the two figures stepped out of

the shadows and gave the fallen man the same kind of contemptuous nudge that had been given to him.

‘He's dead, Candy,’ said the one figure.

‘You sure?’

The other figure rose to his feet and mule-kicked the head of the man on the floor. ‘Seems so,’ he said.

‘I'll be damned,’ said Candy, looking my way. ‘He's all yours. I don't want no part of him.’

I found the jar, which fortunately was unbroken, and went to sit on the sofa next to Candy. In a matter of minutes, the two figures had stripped the other man down to his boxer shorts. Then one of them pulled off the boxer shorts, saying, ‘They look practically new.’ However, he stopped pulling soon enough when he saw what was under them. We all saw what was there, no doubt about that. But I wondered if the others were as confused by it as I was. I had always thought about such things in an ideal sense, a mythic conception handed down over the centuries. But it was nothing like that.

‘Put him in the hole!’ shouted Candy, who had stood up from the sofa and was pointing toward the hallway. ‘Put him in the goddamn hole!’

They dragged the body into the closet and dropped it into the basement. There was a slapping sound made by the unclothed form as it hit the floor down there. When the two figures came out of the closet, Candy said, ‘Now get rid of the rest of this stuff and get rid of the car and get rid of yourselves.’

Before exiting the house, one of the figures turned back. ‘There's a big hunk of cash here, Candy. You're going to need some traveling money. You can't stay here.’

To my relief, Candy took part of the money. I got up from the sofa and set the jar on the cushion beside my friend.

‘Where will you go?’ I asked.

‘There are plenty of places like this one in the city. No heat, no electricity, no plumbing. And no rent. I'll be all right.’

‘I won't say anything.’

‘I know you won't. Good-bye, boy.’

I said good-bye and wandered slowly home, dreaming all the while about what was now in Candy's basement.

By the time I arrived at the house it was after midnight. My mother and sister must have also returned because I could smell the stench from my mother's European cigarettes as soon as I took two steps inside. My father was lying on the living-room sofa, clearly exhausted after so many days of working in the basement. He also seemed quite agitated, his eyes wide open and staring upward, his head moving back and forth in disgust or negation or both, and his voice repeatedly chanting, ‘Hopeless impurities, hopeless impurities.’ Hearing these words helped to release my thoughts from what I had seen at Candy's. They also reminded me that I wanted to ask my father about something he had said to the young man in the second-hand suit who had visited the house earlier that night. But my father's condition at the moment did not appear to lend itself to such talk. In fact, he betrayed no awareness whatever of my presence. Since I did not yet feel up to confronting my mother and sister, who I could now hear were moving about upstairs (probably still unpacking from their trip), I decided to take this opportunity to violate my father's sanctions against entering the basement without his explicit authorization. This,

I believed, would provide me with something to take my mind off the troubling events of that night.

However, as I descended the stairs into my father's basement, I felt my mind and senses being pulled back into the dark region of Candy's basement. Even before I reached the bottom of the stairs, that underground place imposed upon me its atmosphere of ruin and wreckage and of an abysmal chaos that, I was thankful to discover, I still found captivating. And when I saw the state of things down there, I was overcome with a trembling awe that I had never experienced before.

Everything around me was in pieces. It looked as if my father had taken an ax and hacked up the whole apparatus on which he had once placed all his hopes of accomplishing some task that only he cared to envision. Wires and cords hung from the ceiling, all of them chopped through and dangling like vines in a jungle. A greasy, greenish liquid was running across the floor and sluicing into the basement drain. I waded through an undergrowth of broken glass and torn papers. I reached down and picked up some of the pages savagely ripped from my father's voluminous notebooks. Meticulous diagrams and graphs were obscured by words and phrases written with a thick, black marker. Page after page had the word ‘IMPURE’ scrawled over them like graffiti on the walls of a public toilet. Other recurring exclamations were: ‘NOTHING BUT IMPURITIES,”IMPURE HEADS,”NOTHING REVEALED,”NO PURE CONCEPTION,”IMPOSSIBLE IMPURITIES,’ and, finally, ‘THE FORCES OF AN IMPURE UNIVERSE.’

At the far end of the basement I saw a hybrid contraption that looked as if it were a cross between a monarch's throne

and an electric chair. Bound to this device by straps confining his arms and legs and head was the young man in a second-hand suit. His eyes were open, but they had no focus in them. I noticed that the greasy, greenish liquid had its source in a container the size of a water-cooler bottle that was upended next to the big chair. There was a label on the container, written on masking tape, that read SIPHONAGE. Whatever spooks or spirits or other entities had inhabited the young man's head—and my father appeared to have drained off a sizeable quantity of this stuff—were now making their way into the sewer system. They must have lost something, perhaps grown stale, once released from their container, because I felt no aura of the spectral—either malignant or benign—emanating from this residual substance. I was unable to tell if the young man was still alive in any conventional sense of the word. He may have been. In any case, his condition was such that my family would once again need to find another house in which in live.

‘What happened down here?’ said my sister from the other side of the basement. She was sitting on the stairs. ‘Looks like another one of dad's projects took a bad turn.’

‘That's the way it looks,’ I said, walking back toward the stairs.

‘Do you think that guy was carrying much money on him?’

‘I don't know. Probably. He was here collecting for some kind of organization.’

‘Good, because mom and I came back broke. And it's not as if we spent all that much.’

‘Where did you go?’ I said, taking a seat beside my sister.

‘You know I can't talk about that.’

‘I had to ask.’

After a pause, my sister whispered, ‘Daniel, do you know what a hermaphrodite is?’

I tried my best to conceal any reaction to my sister's question, even though it had caused a cyclone of images and emotions to arise within me. That was what had confused me about the police detective's body. In my imagination, I had always pictured a neat separation of parts. But it was nothing like that, as I have already pointed out. Everything was all mixed together. Thank you, Elisa. Despite her adherence to my mother's strict rule of silence, my sister always managed to give away something of what they had been up to.

‘Why do ask that?’ I said, also whispering. ‘Did you meet someone like that when you were with mom?’

‘Absolutely not,’ she said.

‘You have to tell me, Elisa. Did mom… did she talk about me… did she talk about me to this person?’

‘I wouldn't know. I really wouldn't,’ said Elisa as she rose to her feet and walked back upstairs. When she reached the top step, she turned around and said, ‘How's this thing between you and mom going to end? Every time I mention your name, she just clams up. It doesn't make any sense.’

‘The forces of an impure universe,’ I said rhetorically.

‘What?’ said my sister.

‘Nothing that drives anybody makes any sense, if you haven't noticed that by now. It's just our heads, like dad's always saying.’

‘Whatever that means. Anyway, you better keep your mouth shut about what I said. I'm never telling you anything ever again,’ she finished and then went upstairs.

I followed my sister into the living room. My father was now sitting up on the sofa next to my mother, who was opening boxes and pulling things out of bags, presumably showing what she had bought on her latest trip with Elisa. I sat down in a chair across from them.

'Hi, baby,' said my mother.

'Hi, Mom,' I said, then turned to my father. 'Hey, Dad, can I ask you something?' He still seemed a bit delirious. 'Dad?'

'Your father's very tired, honey.'

'I know. I'm sorry. I just want to ask him one thing. Dad, when you were talking to that guy, you said something about three... you called them principles.'

'Countries, deities,' said my father from a deep well of depression. 'Obstacles to pure conception.'

'Yeah, but what was the third principle? You never said anything about that.'

But my father had faded out and was now gazing disconsolately at the floor. My mother, however, was smiling. No doubt she had heard all of my father's talk many times over.

'The third principle?' she said, blowing a cloud of cigarette smoke in my direction. 'Why, it's families, sweetheart.'

Sideshow, And Other Stories (2007 Teatro Grottesco Version)

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At the time I met the man who authored the stories that follow, I had reached a crisis point in my own work as a writer of fiction. This gentleman, who was considerably older than I, was several steps ahead of me along the same path. ‘I have always desired to escape,’ he said, ‘from the grip of show business.’ He said these words to me across the table in a corner booth of the coffee shop where all our meetings took place in the late hours of the night.

We had been first introduced by a waitress working the night shift who noticed we were both insomniacs who came into the coffee shop and sat for many hours smoking cigarettes (the same brand), drinking the terrible decaffeinated coffee they served in that place, and every so often jotting something in the respective notebooks which we both kept at hand. ‘All of the myths of mankind are nothing but show business,’ the other man said to me during our initial meeting. ‘Everything that we supposedly live by and supposedly die by—whether it's religious scriptures or makeshift slogans—all of it is show business. The rise and fall of empires—show business. Science, philosophy, all of the disciplines under the sun, and even the sun itself, as well as all those

other clumps of matter wobbling about in the blackness up there—' he said to me, pointing out the window beside the coffee-shop booth in which we sat, 'show business, show business, show business.' 'And what about dreams?' I asked, thinking I might have hit upon an exception to his dogmatic view, or at least one that he would accept as such. 'You mean the dreams of the sort we are having at this moment or the ones we have when we're fortunate enough to sleep?' I told him his point was well taken and withdrew my challenge, having only half-heartedly advanced it in the first place. The conversation nevertheless proceeded along the same course —he submitting one example after another of show business phenomena; I attempting to propose plausible exceptions to the idiosyncratic doctrine with which he seemed hopelessly obsessed—until we went our separate ways just before dawn.

That first meeting set the tone and fixed the subject matter of my subsequent encounters in the coffee shop with the gentleman I would come to regard as my lost literary father. I should say that I deliberately encouraged the gentleman's mania and did all I could to keep our conversations focused on it, since I felt that his show-business obsession related in the most intimate way with my own quandary, or crisis, as a writer of fiction. What exactly did he mean by 'show business'? Why did he find the 'essentially show-business nature' of all phenomena to be problematic? How did his work as an author coincide with, or perhaps oppose, what he called the 'show-business world'?

'I make no claims for my writing, nor have any hopes for it as a means for escaping the grip of show business,' he said. 'Writing is simply another action I perform on cue. I order this terrible coffee because I'm in a second-rate coffee shop. I

smoke another cigarette because my body tells me it's time to do so. Likewise, I write because I'm prompted to write, nothing more.'

Seeing an entrance to a matter more closely related to my own immediate interest, or quandary or crisis, I asked him about his writing and specifically about what focus it might be said to have, what 'center of interest,' as I put it.

'My focus, or center of interest,' he said, 'has always been the wretched show business of my own life—an autobiographical wretchedness that is not even first-rate show business but more like a series of sideshows, senseless episodes without continuity or coherence except that which, by virtue of my being the ringmaster of this miserable circus of sideshows, I assign to it in the most bogus and show-businesslike fashion, which of course fails to maintain any genuine effect of continuity or coherence, inevitably so. But this, I've found, is the very essence of show business, all of which in fact is no more than sideshow business. The unexpected mutations, the sheer baselessness of beings, the volatility of things... By necessity we live in a world, a sideshow world, where everything is ultimately peculiar and ultimately ridiculous.'

'By what standard?' I interjected before his words—which had arrived at the very heart of the crisis, quandary, and suffocating cul-de-sac of my existence as a writer of fiction—veered away. 'I said by what standard,' I repeated, 'do you consider everything peculiar and ridiculous?'

After staring at me in a way that suggested he was not only considering my question, but was also evaluating me and my entire world, he replied: 'By the standard of that un-

nameable, unknowable, and no doubt nonexistent order that is not show business.'

Without speaking another word he slid out of the corner booth, paid his check at the counter cash register, and walked out of the coffee shop.

That was the last occasion on which I spoke with this gentleman and fellow writer. The next time I visited the coffee shop and sat in the corner booth, the waitress who worked the night shift presented me with a small sheaf of pages. 'He said to give these to you and that he wouldn't be back for them.'

'That's all he said?' I asked.

'That's all,' she answered.

I thanked her, ordered a decaffeinated coffee, lit a cigarette, and began to read the tales that follow.

I. THE MALIGNANT MATRIX

For years I had been privileged to receive frequent and detailed communications regarding the most advanced scientific and metaphysical studies. This information was of a highly specialized nature that seemed to be unknown to the common run of scientists and metaphysicians, yet was nevertheless attainable by such avid non-specialists as myself, providing of course that one possessed a receptive temperament and willingly opened oneself to certain channels of thought and experience.

One day I received a very special communication whereby I learned that an astounding and quite unexpected breakthrough had been achieved—the culmination, it appeared, of many years of intense scientific and metaphysical study. This breakthrough, the communication informed me, con-

cerned nothing less than the discovery of the true origins of all existential phenomena, both physical and metaphysical—the very source, as I understood the claims being made, of existence in the broadest possible sense. This special communication also told me that I had been selected to be among those who would be allowed a privileged view of everything involved in this startling breakthrough discovery, and therefore would be guaranteed a rare insight into the true origins of all existential phenomena. Since I was an individual who was highly receptive in temperament to the matter at hand, I need only present myself at the particular location where this incredible advance in scientific and metaphysical knowledge had occurred.

Scrupulously I followed the directions communicated to me, even though, for reasons that were not explained, I was not fully apprised of the specifics of my actual destination. Nevertheless, I could not help imagining that I would ultimately find myself a visitor at a sophisticated research facility of some kind, a shining labyrinth of the most innovative devices and apparatus of extraordinary complexity. The place where I finally arrived, however, in no way conformed to my simple-minded and deplorably conventional expectations. This scientific and metaphysical installation, as I thought of it, was located in a large building, but one that was very old. I entered it, according to my instructions, through a small door that I found at the end of a dark and narrow alley that ran along the side of the old building. I opened the door and stepped inside, barely able to see two paces in front of me, for by now it was the middle of the night. There was a faint click as the door closed behind my

back, and all I could do was wait for my eyesight to adjust to the darkness.

Moonlight shone down through a window somewhere above me and spread dimly across a dirty concrete floor. I could see that I was standing at the bottom of an empty stairwell. I heard faint sounds of something dragging itself directly toward me. Then I saw what it was that emerged from a shadowy area of that empty stairwell. It was a head supported by a short length of neck on which it pulled itself along like a snail, moving by inches upon the concrete floor. Its features were indistinct yet nonetheless seemed deformed or mutilated, and it was making sounds whose meaning I could not comprehend, its angular jaw opening and closing mechanically. Before the head moved very close to me I noticed there was something else in another, even more shadowy corner of that bleak, moonlit stairwell. Not much larger than the head that was approaching me across the floor, this other object was to my eyes an almost wholly shapeless mass, quite pale, which I was able to identify as animated tissue only because, every so often, it opened itself up like a giant bivalved mollusk found at great suboceanic depths. And it made the same sound as the crawling head was making, both of them crying out at the bottom of that dim and empty stairwell, the place, I had been informed, where I might confront the source of all existential phenomena.

I thought that I might have been misled, as I stood there listening to the cries of those creatures at the bottom of that empty stairwell, and I left that place through the door by which I had entered it. But just as that door was closing behind me I realized how much those sounds I heard reminded

me of the tiny voices of things which, however imperfect their form, have been newly thrust into the world of phenomenal existence.

II. PREMATURE COMMUNICATION

Early one winter morning during my childhood, while I was still lying in bed upstairs, watching a few snowflakes floating outside my bedroom window, I heard a voice from downstairs say these words: 'The ice is breaking up on the river.' This voice was like no other that was familiar to me. It was very harsh and yet very quiet at the same time, as though a heap of rusted machinery had whispered something from the shadows of an old factory. Nothing else was said by this voice.

When I left my room and went downstairs, I found my parents in the kitchen as they usually were at that time on winter mornings, my father reading the newspaper and my mother preparing breakfast while the same snowflakes which were floating outside the window of my room upstairs were now floating so slowly outside the kitchen window. Before I could say anything to either of my parents, my mother suddenly told me that I would have to stay inside the house for the rest of the day, offering no reason for making this demand. In reaction I asked, in the words of a child, if my confinement to the house that day had anything to do with the words that the voice had spoken, that 'the ice was breaking up on the river.' From across the kitchen my father looked up at my mother, neither of them saying a word. In that moment I realized for the first time how many things in the world were entirely unknown to me, how reticent, often

wholly silent, were the people and places of my small childhood world.

I have no memory of the explanation my mother or my father might have offered me as the reason why I had to stay in the house the rest of that day. Actually I had no desire to go outdoors that winter morning, not while that voice, whose mystery remained undispelled by my mother or my father, continued to speak to me in its harsh and quietly distant tone from all the dim corners of the house, as the snowflakes floated outside every window, repeating over and over that the ice was breaking up on the river.

It was not many days afterward that my parents placed me in a hospital where I was administered several potent medications and other forms of treatment. On the way to the hospital my father restrained me in the back seat of the car while my mother served as driver, and I calmed down only during those brief moments when we passed across an old bridge that was built over a fairly wide river which I had never before seen.

During my stay in the hospital I found that it was the medications I was given, rather than the other forms of treatment, that allowed me to grasp the nature of the voice which I had heard on a particular winter morning. I knew that my parents would be crossing that old bridge whenever they came to visit me at the hospital, so on the day when my doctor and a close relative of mine appeared in my room to explain to me the details of a certain ‘tragic event,’ I was the first one to speak. Before they could tell me of my mother and father's fate, and the way in which it had all happened, I said to them: ‘The ice has broken up on the river.’

And the voice speaking these words was not the voice of a child but a harsh yet whispery voice emanating from the depths of that great and ancient machinery which powered, according to its own faulty and unknown mechanisms, the most infinitesimal movements of the world as I knew it. Thus, as my doctor and a close relative of mine explained further what had happened to my parents, I only stared out the window, watching the machinery (into which I had now been assimilated) as it produced each snowflake that fell one by one outside the window of my hospital room.

III. THE ASTRONOMIC BLUR

Along a street of very old houses there was a building that was not a house at all but a little store which kept itself open for business at all hours of the day and night, every single day of the year. At first the store appeared to me as merely primitive, a throwback to some earlier time when a place of business might be allowed to operate in an otherwise residential district, however decayed the houses of the neighborhood may have been. But it was much more than primitive in the usual sense, for the little store declared no name for itself, offered no outward sign to give an indication of its place in the world around it. It was only the local residents who called it ‘the little store,’ when they spoke of it at all.

There was a small window beside the dark wooden door of the building, but if one tried to peer through the foggy glass of this window, nothing recognizable could ever be seen—only a swirling blur of indefinite shapes. And although the building's interior lights were always left on, even in the middle of the night, it was not the bright steady illumination of electricity that seemed to shine through the

window of the place but a dim, vaguely flickering glow. Neither was anyone spied who might have been regarded as the proprietor of the little store, and no one was ever seen either going into or coming out of it, least of all the people in the surrounding neighborhood. Even if a passing car stopped in front and someone got out of the vehicle with the apparent intention of entering the store, they would never get farther than the sidewalk before turning around, getting back inside their car, and driving away. The children in the area always crossed to the opposite side of the street when walking by the little store.

Of course I was curious about this building from the time I first moved into one of the old houses in the neighborhood. I immediately noticed what I then considered the primitive, virtually primal nature of the little store, and I would at great length observe this darkly luminous structure whenever I went out walking, as I often did, in the late hours of the night. I followed this practice for some time, never noticing any change in the little store, never seeing anything that I had not seen the first night I began observing the place.

Then one night something did change in the little store, and something also changed in the neighborhood around it. It was only for a moment that the dim glow burning within the little store seemed to flare up before returning to its usual state of a dull, smoldering flicker. This was all that I saw. Nevertheless, that night I did not return to my home, because it was now glowing with the same primordial light as that within the little store. All the old houses in the neighborhood were lit up in the same way, all of their little windows glowing dimly at that late hour. No one will ever again

emerge from those houses, I thought as I abandoned the streets of that neighborhood. Nor will anyone ever desire to enter them.

Perhaps I had seen too deeply into the nature of the little store, and it was simply warning me to look no further. On the other hand, perhaps I had been an accidental witness to something else altogether, some plan or process whose ultimate stage is impossible to foresee, although there still comes to me, on certain nights, the dream or mental image of a dark sky in which the stars themselves burn low with a dim, flickering light that illuminates an indefinite swirling blur wherein it is not possible to observe any definite shapes or signs.

IV. THE ABYSS OF ORGANIC FORMS

For years I lived with my half-brother, who had been confined to a wheelchair since childhood due to a congenital disease of the spine. Although placid much of the time, my brother, or rather half-brother, would frequently gaze upon me with a bitter and somehow brutish stare. His eyes were such a strange shade of gray, so pale and yet so luminous, that they were the first thing one noticed upon approaching him, and the fact that he inhabited a wheelchair always took second place to the unusual, the truly demonic character of his eyes, in which there was something that I could never bring myself to name.

It was only on rare occasions that my half-brother left the house in which he and I lived together, and these were almost exclusively those times when, at his insistence, I took him to a local racecourse where horses ran most afternoons during the racing season. There we watched the animals

come parading out onto the track and run every race from first to last on a given day, never placing a single wager on any of them, although we always brought home a racing program which contained the names and performance statistics relating to all the horses we had seen. For years I observed my brother, as he sat in his wheelchair just behind the fence that bordered the racetrack, and I noticed how intensely he gazed upon those horses, his gray eyes displaying a different aspect altogether from the bitter and brutish quality they always assumed when we were at home. On days when we did not visit the racecourse, he would pore over the old racing programs containing the names of countless horses and the complex statistics relating to their competitive performance, as well as information regarding their physical nature, including the age of the horses and their various colors, whether brown or bay, roan or gray.

One day I returned to the house where I had lived for many years with my half-brother and found his wheelchair empty in the middle of our living room. Surrounding it in a circle were pieces of paper torn from the old racing programs that my brother collected. A rather considerable mound of these scraps of paper were heaped around my brother's, my half-brother's, wheelchair, and on each of them was printed the name of one of the many horses we had seen on our visits to the racecourse. I myself was quite familiar with these names: Avatara, Royal Troubadour, Hallview Spirit, Mechanical Harry T, and so on. Then I noticed that there was a trail of these torn pieces of paper which seemed to lead away from the wheelchair and toward the front door. I followed them outside the house, where I found a few more fragments of old racing programs out on

the porch. But the trail ended even before I reached the sidewalk, the small scraps of paper having been dispersed by the brisk winds of a cold September day. After investigating for some time, I could find nothing to indicate what had become of my brother—that is, my half-brother—and nor could anyone else. No explanation by any agency or person ever sufficiently illuminated the reason for or method of his disappearance.

It was not long after this incident that, for the first time in my life, I went alone to the racecourse which my brother and I had visited together on so many previous occasions. There I watched the horses come parading out onto the track for each race from first to last.

Following the final race of the day, as the horses were leaving the track to return to the area where they were kept in barns, I saw that one of these animals, a roan stallion, had eyes that were the palest and most peculiar shade of gray. When this particular horse passed the spot where I was standing, these eyes turned upon me, staring directly into my own eyes in a way that seemed bitter and thoroughly brutish and which conveyed to me the sense of something unusual, something truly demonic that I could never bring myself to name.

V. THE PHENOMENAL FRENZY

For a time I had been looking to buy a house in which, barring unforeseen developments, I was planning to live out the rest of my life. During this period of house-searching, I found myself considering properties that were increasingly distant from those nearest to them, until ultimately my search for a house in which to live out the rest of my life

took place entirely in remote areas miles from the most out-of-the-way towns. I myself was sometimes surprised at the backroad landscapes in which I ventured to investigate some old place where a real estate agent had sent me or upon which I simply happened in the course of wandering farther and farther from any kind of developed region, or even one that had the least proximity to other houses.

It was while driving my car through one of these backroad landscapes, on a windy November afternoon, that I discovered the sort of isolated house which at that point was the only conceivable place where I could live out the rest of my life with any chance of being at peace in the world. Although this two-story frame structure stood in a relatively level and austere backroad landscape, with a few bare trees and a ruined water tower intervening between it and the dull autumnal horizon, I did not become aware of its presence until I had nearly passed it by. There was no sign of landscaping immediately surrounding the house, only the same grayish scrub grass that covered the ground everywhere else in the area as far as the eye could see. Yet the house itself seemed relatively new in its construction, and was not exactly the type of run-down place in which I expected to live out the rest of my life in decayed seclusion.

I have already mentioned that it was a windy day, and, as I stood contemplating that spectacularly isolated house, the atmosphere of that vast backroad landscape became almost cyclonic. Furthermore, the sky was beginning to darken at the edges of the horizon, even though there were no clouds to be seen and several hours remained until the approach of twilight. As the force of the winds grew stronger, the only other features in that backroad landscape—the few bare

trees and the ruined water tower—seemed to be receding into the distance away from me, while the house before which I stood appeared to loom closer and closer. In a thoughtless moment of panic I ran back to my car, struggling to open the door as the wind pounded against it. As soon as I was inside the car, I started the engine and drove as fast as conditions would allow. Nevertheless, it seemed that I was making no progress along the route by which I had come to that region: the horizon was still darkening and receding ahead of me while the house in my rear-view mirror remained constant in its looming perspective. Eventually, however, things began to change and that backroad landscape, along with the isolated two-story house, diminished behind me.

Only later did I ask myself where I would live out the rest of my life if not in that backroad landscape, that remote paradise in which a house had been erected that seemed perfectly designed for me. But this same place, a true resting place in which I should have been able to live out the rest of my life in some kind of peace, was now only one more thing that I had to fear.

AFTERWORD

In addition to the five stories presented here, I also found notes, mostly in the form of unconnected phrases, for a sixth story with the apparent working title of ‘Sideshow.’ Following the manner of the other pieces, this story similarly seemed destined to be no more than a dreamlike vignette, an episode of ‘peculiar and ridiculous show business,’ to quote from the author's notes. There were other unique phrases or ideas that appeared in these notes which had also emerged

in my conversations with the author as we sat in the corner booth of that coffee shop throughout the course of several nights. For example, such phrases as ‘the volatility of things’ and ‘unexpected mutations’ appeared repeatedly, as if these were to serve as the guiding principles of this presumably abandoned narrative.

I suppose I should not have been surprised to find that the author of the aborted narrative had made references to myself, since he had clearly characterized his work to me as ‘autobiographical wretchedness.’ In these notes I am fairly designated as the ‘other man in the coffee shop’ and as a ‘pitiful insomniac who manufactures artistic conundrums for himself in order to distract his mind from the sideshow town in which he has spent his life.’ The words ‘sideshow town’ appear earlier in what seems to be the intended opening sentence of the aborted, or perhaps deliberately abandoned, story. This particular sentence is interesting in that it directly suggests a continuity with one of the other stories, something that, in my notice, is otherwise absent among these feverish, apparently deranged fragments. ‘After failing to find a house in which I might live out the rest of my life,’ the sentence begins, ‘I began to travel frantically from one sideshow town to another, each of them descending further than the one before it into the depths of a show-business world.’

Given the incomplete nature of the notes for the story called ‘Sideshow,’ not to mention the highly elliptical quality that was conspicuous even in the author's completed works which I had read, I did not search very long for the modicum of ‘coherence and continuity’ that he claimed to assign to the ‘senseless episodes’ forming the fundamental stratum of

both his writings and his experience of the world. And at some point these notes ceased to resemble a rough outline for a work-in-progress and took on the tone of a journal or private confession. ‘Told X [a reference to myself, I assumed] that I wrote when I was prompted,’ he wrote.

‘Didn't mention what might constitute such a prompt, and he didn't ask. Very strange, since he seemed to display all the subtle qualities of a highly receptive temperament, not to mention those far less subtle traits which were evident from our first meeting. Like gazing into a funhouse mirror: the glaring likeness of our literary pursuits, our shared insomnia, even the brand of cigarette which we both smoked, often lighting up at the same time. I wasn't going to draw attention to these details, but why didn't he?’

I recalled that one night I had questioned the meaning of my companion's statement that everything (in a ‘sideshow world,’ that is) was ‘ultimately peculiar and ultimately ridiculous.’ In his notes, or confession, he wrote: ‘No standard exists for the peculiarity and ridiculousness of things, not even one that is unspeakable or unknowable, words which are merely a front or a subterfuge. These qualities—the peculiar and the ridiculous—are immanent and absolute in all existence and would be in any conceivable existent order…’ This last sentence is transcribed thus from the author's notes, truncated by ellipsis so that he could immediately jump to his next thought, which was written on the same line. ‘Why didn't X challenge this assertion? Why did he allow so many things to remain on the surface that might easily have gone so much deeper?’ And on the line directly below that, he wrote: ‘Some peculiar and ridiculous fate in a sideshow town.’

After I finished reading the five completed stories and the notes-cum-journal or confession relating to a sixth tale, I left the coffee shop, eager not to allow even the faintest touch of the approaching dawn to catch me sitting in that corner booth, a circumstance that I always found intensely depressing for some reason. I followed my usual course of backstreets and alleys home, pausing every so often to admire the suggestive glow in the window of a little store or the network of sagging wires that was everywhere strung above me, the power surging within them seeming to pull me along and put each of my steps in place. This was indeed a sideshow town in every way, peculiar and ridiculous in its essence, though no more so than any other place. I think that my coffee-shop companion might at one time have had a profound appreciation for this state of affairs but had somehow lost it. In the end it seemed that he could not attain even an attitude of resignation, let alone the strength to let himself be carried along by the immanent and absolute realities, the great inescapable matters which he had been privileged to glimpse, so to speak, at the bottom of a dim and empty stairwell.

I was almost home when I heard a commotion in a pile of debris beneath the silvery-blue luminescence of a streetlight in an alley. Looking deep into the mound of empty paint cans, bicycle wheels stripped of their tires, rusty curtain rods, and the like, I saw the little creature. It was something that might have come from a jar in a museum exhibit or a carnival sideshow. What I most clearly remember is the impression made on me by its pale gray eyes, which I had already guessed were a family trait and which had looked at me numerous times from the other side of a corner booth in

a coffee shop. These eyes now stared at me accusingly over a bundled stack of old newspapers, those heaping chronicles of the sideshow world. As I began to walk away, the shrunken creature tried to call out to me, but the only sound it managed to make was a coarse raspy noise that briefly echoed down the alley. ‘No,’ he had written in his notes to the unfinished sixth story. ‘I refuse to be a scribe for this show-business phenomenon any longer.’ I, on the other hand, had triumphed over my literary crisis and wanted nothing more than to get back to my desk, my brain practically vibrating with an unwonted energy in spite of passing another night without any sleep.

The Town Manager (2007 Teatro Grottesco Version)

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One gray morning not long before the onset of winter, some troubling news swiftly travelled among us: the town manager was not in his office and seemed nowhere to be found. We allowed this situation, or apparent situation, to remain tentative for as long as we could. This was simply how we had handled such developments in the past.

It was Carnes, the man who operated the trolley which ran up and down Main Street, who initially recognized the possibility that the town manager was no longer with us. He was the first one who noticed, as he was walking from his house at one end of town to the trolley station at the other end, that the dim lamp which had always remained switched on inside the town manager's office was now off.

Of course, it was not beyond all credibility that the light-bulb in the lamp that stood in the corner of the town manager's desk had simply burned out or that there had been a short circuit in the electrical system of the small office on Main Street. There might even have been a more extensive power failure that also affected the rooms above the office, where the town manager resided since he had first arrived among us to assume his duties. Certainly we all knew the

town manager as someone who was in no way vigilant regarding the state of either his public office or his private living quarters.

Consequently, those of us in the crowd that had gathered outside the town manager's office, and his home, considered both the theory of an expired lightbulb and that of an electrical short circuit at some length. Yet all the while, our agitation only increased. Carnes was the one whose anxiety over this matter was the most severe, for the present state of affairs had afflicted him longer than anyone else, if only by a few minutes. As I have already indicated, this was not the first time that we had been faced with such a development. So when Carnes finally called for action, the rest of us soon abandoned our refuge in the theoretical. ‘It's time to do something,’ said the trolley driver. ‘We have to know.’

Ritter, who ran the local hardware store, jimmied open the door to the town manager's office, and several of us were soon searching around inside. The place was fairly neat, if only by virtue of being practically unfurnished. There was simply a chair, a desk, and the lamp on top of the desk. The rest of it was just empty floor space and bare walls. Even the drawers of the desk, as some of the more curious members of our search party discovered, were all empty. Ritter was checking the wall socket into which the lamp's cord was plugged, and someone else was inspecting the fuse box at the back of the office. But these were merely stall tactics. No one wanted to reach under the lampshade and click the switch to find out whether the bulb had merely burned out or, more ominously, the place had been given over to darkness by design. The latter action, as all of us were aware, signaled

that the tenure of any given town manager was no longer in effect.

At one time, our nexus of public services and functions was a traditional town hall rising up at the south end of Main Street. Rather than a small lamp clinging to the edge of a time-worn desk, that impressive structure was outfitted with a great chandelier. This dazzling fixture served as a beacon assuring us that the town's chief official was still with us. When the town hall fell into decay and finally had to be abandoned, other buildings gave out their illumination —from the upper floors of the old opera house (also vacated in the course of time) to the present storefront office that had more recently served as the center of the town's civic administration. But there always came a day when, without notice to anyone in the town, the light went out.

'He's not upstairs,' Carnes yelled down to us from the town manager's private rooms. At that precise moment, I had taken it upon myself to try the light switch. The bulb lit up, and everyone in the room went mute. After a time, somebody—to this day I cannot recall who it was—stated in a resigned voice, 'He has left us.'

Those were the words that passed through the crowd outside the town manager's office... until everyone knew the truth. No one even speculated that this development might have been caused by mischief or a mistake. The only conclusion was that the old town manager was no longer in control and that a new appointment would be made, if in fact this had not already been done.

Nonetheless, we still had to go through the motions. Throughout the rest of that gray morning and into the afternoon, a search was conducted. Over the course of my life,

these searches were performed with increasingly greater speed and efficiency whenever one town manager turned up missing as the prelude to the installation of another. The buildings and houses comprising our town were now far fewer than in my childhood and youth. Whole sections that had once been districts of prolific activity had been transformed by a remarkable corrosion into empty lots where only a few bricks and some broken glass indicated that anything besides weeds and desiccated earth had ever existed there. During my years of youthful ambition, I had determined that one day I would have a house in a grand neighborhood known as The Hill. This area was still known as such, a designation bitterly retained even though the real estate in question—now a rough and empty stretch of ground—no longer rose to a higher elevation than the land surrounding it.

After satisfying ourselves that the town manager was nowhere to be found within the town, we moved out into the countryside. Just as we were going through the motions when we searched inside the town limits, we continued going through the motions as we tramped through the landscape beyond them. As previously stated, the time of year was close to the onset of winter, and there were only a few bare trees to obstruct our view in any direction as we wandered over the hardening earth. We kept our eyes open, but we could not pretend to be meticulous searchers.

In the past, no town manager had ever been found, either alive or dead, once he had gone missing and the light in his office had been turned off. Our only concern was to act in such a way that would allow us to report to the new town manager, when he appeared, that we had made an effort to

discover the whereabouts of his predecessor. Yet this ritual seemed to matter less and less to each successive town manager, the most recent of whom barely acknowledged our attempts to locate the dead or living body of the previous administrator. ‘What?’ he said after he finally emerged from dozing behind the desk in his office.

‘We did the best we could,’ repeated one of us who had led the search, which on that occasion had taken place in early spring. ‘It stormed the entire time,’ said another.

After hearing our report, the town manager merely replied, ‘Oh, I see. Yes, well done.’ Then he dismissed us and returned to his nap.

‘Why do we even bother?’ said Leeman the barber when we were outside the town manager's office. ‘We never find anything.’

I referred him and the others to the section of the town charter, a brief document to be sure, that required ‘a fair search of the town and its environs’ whenever a town manager went missing. This was part of an arrangement that had been made by the founders and that had been upheld throughout succeeding generations. Unfortunately, nothing in the records that had come to be stored in the new opera house, and were subsequently lost to the same fire that destroyed this shoddily constructed building some years before, had ever overtly stated with whom this arrangement had been made. (The town charter itself was now only a few poorly phrased notes assembled from recollections and lore, although the specifics of this rudimentary document were seldom disputed.) At the time, no doubt, the founders had taken what seemed the best course for the survival and prosperity of the town, and they forged an arrangement that

committed their descendants to this same course. There was nothing extraordinary about such actions and agreements.

'But that was years ago,' said Leeman on that rainy spring afternoon. 'I for one think that it's time to find out just who we're dealing with.'

Others agreed with him. I myself did not disagree. Nonetheless, we never did manage to broach the subject with the old town manager. But as we walked across the countryside on that day so close to the onset of winter, we talked among ourselves and vowed that we would pose certain questions to the new town manager, who usually arrived not long after the disappearance or abdication of the previous administrator, sometimes on the very same day.

The first matter we wished to take up was the reason we were required to conduct a futile search for missing town managers. Some of us believed that these searches were merely a way of distracting us, so that the new town manager could take office before anyone had a chance to observe by what means he arrived or from what direction he came. Others were of the opinion that these expeditions did in fact serve some purpose, although what that may have been was beyond our understanding. Either way, we were all agreed that it was time for the town—that is, what there was left of it—to enter a new and more enlightened era in its history. However, by the time we reached the ruined farmhouse, all our resolutions dissolved into the grayness in which that day had been enveloped.

Traditionally, the ruined farmhouse, along with the wooden shed that stood nearby, marked the point at which we ended our search and returned to town. It was now close to sundown, which would give us just enough time to be

back in our homes before dark once we had made a perfunctory inspection of the farmhouse and its shed. But we never made it that far. This time we kept our distance from that farmhouse, which was no more than a jagged and tilting outline against the gray sky, as well as from the shed, a narrow structure of thin wooden planks that someone had hammered together long ago. There was something written across those weathered boards, markings that none of us had ever seen before. They were scored into the wood, as if with a sharp blade. Some of the letters were either missing or unreadable in the places where they were gouged into planks that had separated from one another. Carnes the trolley man was standing at my side.

'Does that say what I think it says?' he said to me, almost in a whisper.

'I think so.'

'And the light inside?'

'Like smoldering embers,' I said concerning the reddish glow that was shining through the wooden slats of the shed.

Having recognized the arrival of the new town manager —from whatever direction and by whatever means he may have come—we all turned away and walked silently toward town, pacing slowly through the gray countryside that day by day was being seized by the coming winter.

Despite what we had come across during our search, we soon reconciled ourselves to it, or at least we had reached a point where we no longer openly expressed our anxiety. Did it really matter if, rather than occupying a building on Main Street with a sign that read TOWN MANAGER over the door, the one who now held this position chose to occupy a shed whose rotting wooden planks had roughly the same words

inscribed upon them with a sharp blade? Things had always been moving in that direction. At one time the town manager conducted business from a suite of offices in the town hall and lived in a fine house in The Hill district of town. Now this official would be working out of a weather-beaten shed next to a ruined farmhouse. Nothing remained the same for very long. Change was the very essence of our lives.

My own situation was typical. As previously mentioned, I had ambitions of owning a residence in The Hill district. For a time I operated a delivery business that almost certainly would have led to my attaining this goal. However, by the time the old town manager arrived, I was sweeping the floors at Leeman's barbershop and taking whatever odd jobs came along. In any case, my drive to build up a successful delivery business was all but extinguished once The Hill district had eroded away to nothing.

Perhaps the general decline in the conditions of the town, as well as the circumstances of its residents, could be attributed to poor officiating on the part of our town managers, who in many ways seemed to be less and less able in their duties as one succeeded another over the years. Whatever apprehensions we had about the new town manager, it could not be said that the old town manager had been a model administrator. For some time before his term came to an end, he had spent the whole of each working day asleep behind his desk.

On the other hand, every town manager could be credited with introducing some element of change, some official project of one kind or another, that was difficult to condemn as wholly detrimental. Even if the new opera house had never been anything but a shoddily constructed firetrap, it non-

etheless represented an effort at civic rehabilitation, or at least gave this impression. For his part, the old manager had been responsible for the trolley which ran up and down Main Street. In the early days of his administration, he had brought in workers from outside the town to construct this monument to his spirit of innovation. Not that there had ever been a great outcry for such a conveyance in our town, which could easily be traversed from one end to the other either on foot or by bicycle without causing the least exertion to those of us who were in reasonably good health. Nevertheless, once the trolley had been built, most of us rode the thing at one time or another, if only for the novelty of it. Some people, for whatever reason, made regular use of this new means of transportation and even seemed to depend on it to carry them the distance of only a few blocks. If nothing else, the trolley provided Carnes with regular employment, which he had not formerly enjoyed.

In brief, we had always managed to adapt to the ways of each town manager who had been sent to us. The difficult part was waiting for new administrators to reveal the nature of their plans for the town and then adjusting ourselves to whatever form they might take. This was the system in which we had functioned for generations. This was the order of things into which we had been born and to which we had committed ourselves by compliance. The risk of opposing this order, of plunging into the unknown, was simply too much for us to contemplate for very long. But we did not foresee, despite having witnessed the spectacle of the shed beside the ruined farmhouse, that the town was about to enter a radically new epoch in its history.

The first directive from the new town manager was communicated to us by a torn piece of paper that came skipping down the sidewalk of Main Street one day and was picked up by an old woman, who showed it to the rest of us. The paper was made from a pulpy stock and was brownish in color. The writing on the paper looked as if it had been made with charred wood and resembled the same hand that had written those words across the old boards of the town manager's shed. The message was this: DUSTROY TROLY.

While the literal sense of these words was apparent enough, we were reluctant to act upon a demand that was so obscure in its point and purpose. It was not unprecedented for a new town manager to obliterate some structure or symbol that marked the administration of the one who had come before him, so that the way might be cleared for him to erect a defining structure or symbol of his own, or simply to efface any prominent sign of the previous order and thereby display the presence of a new one. But usually some reason was offered, some excuse was made, for taking this action. This obviously was not the case with the town manager's instruction to destroy the trolley. So we decided to do nothing until we received some enhancement regarding this matter. Ritter suggested that we might consider composing a note of our own to request further instructions. This note could be left outside the door of the town manager's shed. Not surprisingly, there were no volunteers for this mission. And until we received a more detailed notice, the trolley would remain intact.

The following morning the trolley came tooting down Main Street for its first run of the day. However, it made no stops for those waiting along the sidewalk. ‘Look at this,’

Leeman said to me as he stared out the front window of his barbershop. Then he went outside. I set my broom against a wall and joined him. Others were already standing on the street, watching the trolley until it finally came to rest at the other end of town. ‘There was no one at the switch,’ said Leeman, an observation that a number of persons echoed. When it seemed that the trolley was not going to make a return trip, several of us walked down the street to investigate. When we entered the vehicle, we found the naked body of Carnes the trolley driver lying on the floor. He had been severely mutilated and was dead. Burned into his chest were the words: DUSTROY TROLY.

We spent the next few days doing exactly that. We also pulled up the tracks that ran the length of the town and tore down the electrical system that had powered the trolley. Just as we were completing these labors, someone spotted another piece of that torn, brownish paper. It was being pushed about by the wind in the sky above us, jerking about like a kite. Eventually it descended into our midst. Standing in a circle around the piece of paper, we read the scrawled words of the message. ‘GUD,’ it said. ‘NXT YUR JBS WULL CHNG.’

Not only did our jobs change, but so did the entire face of the town. Once again, workmen came from outside with orders to perform various kinds of construction, demolition, and decoration that began along Main Street and ultimately extended into the outlying neighborhoods. We had been instructed by the usual means not to interfere with them. Throughout the deep gray winter, they worked on the interiors of the town's buildings. With the coming of spring, they finished off the exteriors and were gone. What they left be-

hind them was a place that did not resemble a town as much as it did a carnival funhouse. And those of us who lived there functioned as sideshow freaks once we had been notified, by the usual method, of exactly how our jobs had changed.

For example, Ritter's Hardware had been emptied of its traditional merchandise and restructured as an elaborate maze of lavatories. Upon entering the front door you immediately found yourself standing between a toilet and a sink. Built into one of the walls of this small room was another door that opened upon another lavatory that was somewhat larger in dimensions. This room had two doors that led to further lavatories, some of which could be reached only by ascending a spiral staircase or walking down a long, narrow corridor. Each lavatory differed somewhat in size and décor. None of the lavatories was functional. The exterior of Ritter's Hardware was given a new façade constructed of large stone blocks and a pair of fake towers standing on either side of the building and rising some distance above it. A sign above the front door designated the former hardware store COMFORT CASTLE. Ritter's new job was to sit in a chair on the sidewalk outside his former place of business wearing a simple uniform with the word ATTENDANT displayed in sewn lettering below the left shoulder.

Leeman the barber was even less fortunate in the new career that had been assigned to him. His shop, renamed ‘Baby Town,’ had been refurbished into a gigantic playpen. Amid stuffed animals and an array of toys, Leeman was required to languish in infants’ clothing sized for an adult.

All of the businesses along Main Street had been transformed in some manner, although their tone was not always as whimsical as Ritter's Comfort Castle or Leeman's Baby

Town. A number of the buildings appeared simply as abandoned storefronts—until one explored the interior and discovered that the back room was actually a miniature movie theater where foreign cartoons were projected upon a bare wall or that hidden in the basement was an art gallery filled entirely with paintings and sketches of questionable taste. Sometimes these abandoned storefronts were precisely what they appeared to be, except you would find yourself locked inside once the door had closed, forcing you to exit out the back.

Behind the stores of Main Street was a world of alleys where it was perpetually night, an effect created by tunnel-like arcades enclosing this vast area. Dim lamps were strategically placed so that no stretch of alley was entirely in darkness as you wandered between high wooden fences or brick walls. Many of the alleys ended up in someone's kitchen or living room, allowing an escape back into the town. Some of them kept growing more and more narrow until no further progress was possible and every step leading to this point needed to be retraced. Other alleys gradually altered as one walked along their length, eventually presenting a complete change of scene from that of a small town to one of a big city where screams and sirens could be heard in the distance, although these sounds were only recordings piped in through hidden speakers. It was in just such a vicinity, where painted theatrical backdrops of tall tenement buildings with zig-zagging fire escapes rose up on every side, that I worked at my own new job.

At the terminus of an obscure alley where steam was pumped through the holes of a false sewer grating, I had been stationed in a kiosk where I sold soup in paper cups. To

be more accurate, it was not actually soup that I was given to sell but something more like bouillon. Behind the counter that fronted my kiosk there was a thin mattress on the floor where I could sleep at night, or whenever I felt like sleeping, since it seemed unlikely that any customers would venture through that labyrinth of alleys so that I might serve them. I subsisted on my own bouillon and the water I used to concoct this desolate repast. It seemed to me that the new town manager would finally succeed in the task which his predecessors had but lazily pursued over the years: that of thoroughly bleeding the town of the few resources that had been left to it. I could not have been more wrong in this assessment.

Within a matter of weeks, I had a steady stream of customers lined up outside my bouillon concession who were willing to pay an outrageous price for my watery, yellowish liquid. These were not my fellow citizens but people from outside. I noticed that nearly all of them carried folded brochures which either extruded from their pockets or were grasped in their hands. One of these was left behind on the counter that fronted my kiosk, and I read it as soon as business slowed down. The cover of the brochure bore the words HAVE A FUN TIME IN FUNNY TOWN. Inside were several captioned photographs of the various 'attractions' that our town had to offer to the curious tourist. I was in awe of the town manager's scheme. Not only had this faceless person taken our last penny to finance the most extensive construction project the town had ever seen, from which there was no doubt a considerable amount of kickback involved, but this ingenious boondoggle had additionally brought an unprecedented flood of revenue into our town.

Yet the only one who truly prospered was the town manager. Daily, sometimes hourly, collections were made at each of the town's attractions and concessions. These were carried out by solemn-faced strangers who were visibly armed with an array of weapons. In addition, I noticed that spies had been integrated among the tourists, just to insure that none of us withheld more than a meager allotment of the profits that derived from the town's new enterprise. Nonetheless, whereas we had once had reason to expect nothing less than total impoverishment under the governance of the town manager, it now appeared that we would at least survive.

One day, however, the crowds of tourists began to thin out. In short order, the town's new business dwindled to nothing. The solemn-faced men no longer bothered to make their collections, and we began to fear the worst. Hesitantly, we started to emerge from our places and gathered together on Main Street under a sagging banner that read WELCOME TO FUNNY TOWN.

‘I think that's it,’ said Ritter, who was still wearing his bathroom attendant's uniform.

‘Only one way to be sure,’ said Leeman, now back in adult clothes.

Once again we tramped out to the countryside under a gray sky some weeks before the onset of winter. It was approaching dusk, and long before we reached the town manager's shed we could see that no reddish light glowed inside. Nevertheless, we searched the shed. Then we searched the farmhouse. There was no town manager. There was no money. There was nothing.

When the rest of them turned away and began to head back to town, I stayed behind. Another town manager would arrive before long, and I did not wish to see what form the new administration would take. This was the way it had always been—one town manager succeeding another, each of them exhibiting signs of greater degeneracy, as if they were festering away into who knows what. And there was no telling where it would all end. How many others would come and go, taking with them more and more of the place where I had been born and was beginning to grow old? I thought about how different that place had been when I was a child. I thought about my youthful dream of having a home in The Hill district. I thought about my old delivery business.

Then I walked in the opposite direction from the town. I walked until I came to a road. And I walked down that road until I came to another town. I passed through many towns, as well as large cities, doing clean-up work and odd jobs to keep myself going. All of them were managed according to the same principles as my old home town, although I came upon none that had reached such an advanced stage of degeneracy. I had fled that place in hopes of finding another that had been founded upon different principles and operated under a different order. But there was no such place, or none that I could find. It seemed the only course of action left to me was to make an end of it.

Not long after realizing the aforementioned facts of my existence, I was sitting at the counter of a crummy little coffee shop. It was late at night, and I was eating soup. I was also thinking about how I might make an end of it. The coffee shop may have been in a small town or a large city. Now that I think of it, the place stood beneath a highway over-

pass, so it must have been the latter. The only other customer in the place was a well-dressed man sitting at the other end of the counter. He was drinking a cup of coffee and, I noted, directing a sidelong glance at me every so often. I turned my head toward him and gave him a protracted stare. He smiled and asked if he could join me at my end of the counter.

'You can do whatever you like. I'm leaving.'

'Not just yet,' he said as he sat down at the counter stool next to mine. 'What business are you in?'

'None in particular. Why?'

'I don't know. You just seem like someone who knows his way around. You've been some places, am I right?'

'I suppose so,' I said.

'I thought as much. Look, I'm not just interested in chit-chat here. I work on commission finding people like you. And I think you've got what it takes.'

'For what?' I asked.

'Town management,' he replied.

I finished off the last few spoonfuls of my soup. I wiped my mouth with a paper napkin. 'Tell me more,' I said.

It was either that or make an end of it.

The Spectral Link (Introduction) (2014 The Spectral Link Version)

First published in *The Spectral Link*, 2014

To be at odds with the status quo of one's world can be frustrating to the point of madness. Fear, hate, and desperation are just a few of the mental states that fall to those who would have things other than they are. To become unhinged from the majority is to lose that vital link that keeps one complacently within the fold. Set adrift within the forbidden, the outsider remains on a steady course toward utter doom.

Not infrequently, accommodations are eventually made for the discontented, though they may come too late for those who need them most—the irremediably disconsolate, for example. For them, nothing less than an easeful annihilation upon request will suffice. Thus far, however, this desideratum has been withheld. Quite likely, it is being kept in reserve for the future, when the rigid morals of former days relax, as they tend to do. What once seemed to require a metaphysical upheaval is then accepted as commonplace. Still, none can say that this upheaval did not secretly occur.

Of course, the situation is hopeless for those who wish an alteration in affairs that by their very nature are fixed and define the world in which we are all chained. Their dispute

is with reality itself, or what passes for reality. In these instances, no changes are forthcoming—the link to nightmare may seem nebulous, even wholly doubtful, but it holds fast all the same. There is no harm in wondering about certain matters: Who? What? Why? But to ask for answers is to be condemned to a life sentence of silence. At that point, insanity may become the only salvation, that is, until an easeful annihilation upon request is permitted.

Metaphysica Morum (2014 The Spectral Link Version)

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My instructions were to follow a sequence of absurdly simple acts and to keep the operation secret. First, I was to make my way into the assigned environment; second, I would depart in the most natural manner, undetected if possible, though that part was not essential. Such was the basic framework of the dream. Nevertheless, my sense was that the orders I was carrying out would have repercussions in a far greater scheme. While feelings of this kind often inhere in night visions, their quality on this occasion seemed of a nature surpassing anything I had previously experienced in the world of sleep.

The role I was to play was that of a common individual on a "shopping mission," words that suggested to me the most sinister fusion of the banal and the remarkable. I was already in character when someone approached me—the Dealer (as I thought of him)—to accommodate my pretended purpose. His place of business, that "chain of galaxies" showroom, impressed me as having been synthesized in a rented bathtub, as my mind conceived it. At the same time, this was not an unfamiliar environment to me. Once again, I quivered at a representation of the outlandish and the everyday. It was in some way an analogue of the world I desper-

ately wanted to exit by suicide in my waking life, ideally by the administration of an anesthetic—the most benign form of euthanasia. In a momentary flash of lucidity, I even came to the realization that such a procedure was then unsanctioned in both the material realm as well as the most distant frontiers to which I had been directed in dreams.

The Dealer was a lanky specimen who was nearly twice my height. He seemed about to break at the waist as he bent toward me. For what seemed the tenth time, he said, "If I understand you correctly, sir, you are in the market for an *all-new context*."

"I shouldn't be able to see so far," I said. I meant the dimensions of the dream. There seemed no limit to what my sight beheld. Grotesque patterns were in movement seemingly light-years from where I stood.

"You are a metaphysical mutant, if I'm not mistaken. Not even a generation from the swamplands, fertile soil for aberrations of all types." I now felt a connection to some awful genesis, something transmitting forces of harm to the nucleus of my being. "And you've been seeking my services for some time."

Much more was said, words spoken to me in an unknown language, yet one I understood as relating to schemes of immense repercussions. And there were other things that were not said but still related all the same, as if my mind were communing with itself. There were instructions of intent, infinitely complex processes and principles at work, manifestations that were singular and manifold at once, particular and universal, arbitrary and absolute, all of which were correlated in ways both infinitesimal and immeasurable within my nature. As is common in dreams of affairs beyond

sensible conception, which I had experienced all my life and over the years refined into the formulations here articulated, I was overwhelmed by an uncanny dread and thereby phased out of sleep.

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Now, by this time of my life, I usually awoke from such a dream in a state of agitated annoyance, both with the deranged experience I had just undergone and with my ranking as a defective human being, which is to say a human being as such. As a dreaming organism I had long ago abandoned obsessing over scenarios and details of a symbolic standing, tediously auditing that which I allowed to be sucked down the drain of all psychological point or meaning within seconds of my regaining consciousness of the waking world. And as I have noted, this world itself seemed to me no better than a landscape synthesized in a rented bathtub, oneirically speaking. But on this dream occasion, as I will refer to these excursions henceforth, the words “all-new context” stayed with me and did not disappear into the black hole of my careless memory.

I brought this phrase to the next session I had scheduled with my therapist cum meditation instructor, who hung his shingle outside an old storefront. His name was Dr. Olan. However, with his familiars and clients he preferred to be addressed as Dr. O. This personal designation also appeared on his business cards, as if it were some kind of alias. The simple “O,” he once explained to me, was not a declaration of negativism, as I once hoped, but one of openness to interpretation and non-sectarianism. I found this affectation

nauseating, but at the time I wrote it off as part of the whole package that was Dr. O: his gentle yet commanding manner, his projection of a superior erudition, and, despite his shabby place of business, his clearly expensive yet tasteful attire and fastidiously groomed person. Furthermore, I was not in a position to shop around for the help I needed to get me from one day to another. And the only reason I needed such help was that what I really wanted—to be euthanized by anesthesia—was not available to me in the barbaric society to which I belonged. While Dr. O was capable of assisting me in my true desire, I was not so unhinged or unreasonable as to expect his compliance. In fact, he would not even allow me to speak of it due to his expansive acceptance of an objective moral order in the universe.

"An 'all-new context,'" repeated Dr. O when I told him of my dream occasion. "Interesting."

"Why is it interesting?" I asked.

"Well, for one thing, it's so open to exegesis."

This reaction in no way took me aback. As I have suggested, Dr. O was so blatantly, so ostentatiously open to "delightful possibilities and interpretations" that nothing really meant anything, or not much, in whatever context he spoke at a given time. For this reason, I often felt like murdering him. However, the intensity of my demoralized state of emotion left me with nowhere else to go, since I had been rejected by every other psychotherapist to whom I had previously appealed. And having somewhere to go was at this point all I had going for me, that is, until I went for good, preferably via euthanasia by painless anesthetic. Nevertheless, I must admit that I still felt at some level a totally idiotic need to exhaust every speck of interest left to me in being alive. Con-

sequently, I was drawn in by Dr. O's use of the word "interesting." Of course, he knew that this is how I would react, just as I knew how he would react. The whole pitiful drama between us was such that there were no surprises, or none that indicated any progress in my condition. There were only confirmations that everything was just what it seemed —birth, the business of living, and death. This was simple enough for most, but quite intolerable for a moral and sometimes even a phenomenal nihilist like me.

Claiming that he found the phrase "all-new context" to be interesting was a sort of empty compliment, though I could not prove it or I might have saved myself much time and expense. After all, it was not as if I needed Dr. O to perform emergency surgery on my body, just to tinker enough with my brain to keep me from going to ruin in a purely *psychic context*. And what therapist or meditation guru does not use flattery as a tool of leverage when dealing with his clientele? No one who seeks the attention of either type of healer, let alone one who is both, wants to be seen as just another face in the crowd. If one is defective, as are we all in some way, being *uniquely* defective is something of a consolation in the absence of a cure.

All the same, my resentment of Dr. O was based primarily on his prestige as an authority figure, one who by virtue of his specialized learning could lord it over anyone willing to pay in order to benefit from what he knew, or pretended to know. This attitude toward authority figures applied with special vehemence to those who conveyed, though they may not explicitly declare as much, the condition of being "saved"—that is, of having no need to fret over the plight of human existence. While there is nothing inherently con-

temptible about the saved, I nonetheless could not help but scorn them. One might say that this was the result of my envy of persons who did not suffer from the defects, or at least the same defects, that I did. To my mind, though, I despised the saved for what I saw as their sense of contentment with the order of being in its physical essence, its psychological essence, and not unusually in a metaphysical essence they contended to experience, so boundless they could be in their outright assertions of directly apprehending all reality.

The whole business of a therapist's or guru's occupation was in my view tantamount to a swindle. There is no necessary or sufficient reason to possess, or feign to possess, a sense of salvation in light of the pain of existence. But because I was taking a chance that Dr. O might do me some good, I had to go along with his being saved, even if it was all an act to cover up the unavoidable harm that awaits us all. As a physician of mine once said in a rare moment of candor, “Everybody ends up badly. At best, it's only the luck of one in a million if you don't see it coming. I should know. It's my business.” Afterward, he charged me a considerable sum for an emergency surgery. Such episodes have been a running theme in my life since my earliest days. You could attribute my psychological instability to this fact as well as to the dream occasions that so suspiciously bled into my quotidian life that sometimes I could not tell one from the other, which hypothetically might be attributed to there being no actual distinction between them.

On top of all of the above-mentioned ordeals concerning my presence in the world, my therapist-guru took liberties that I resented. One of these liberties that aggrieved me also intimated and suggested to me Dr. O's true identity as noth-

ing but a swindler was the following: he was always moving around the city to take advantage of rental rates and lowered property taxes attaching to places that had become undesirable due to criminal activities and other forms of urban degeneration. Dr. O once explained this strategy to me when I complained about coming to see him in a warehouse hovel by the city's docks, a venue that attracted an array of unlawful enterprises.

“An indifference to one's surroundings,” Dr. O intoned, “is basic to any psychological or spiritual advancement. The Enlightened One himself relocated from a palace to a life of uncertainty and hardship on the open road, not the other way around.”

What authenticity was contained in Dr. O's excuse for his deteriorating professional locales, I could not tell. How else could he explain his questionable migrations—that he was perpetually on the run from creditors as a consequence of some illegal undertaking on his part? Even if I suggested such a possibility, he would only have recast this accusation to conform to his public image as an elevated being who was well worth the discount rates he charged. Naturally, an excuse of this kind would just exacerbate my scorn for the saved and their smug sense of how perfectly right things were in the universe, while at the same time highlighting my impotence to challenge their claim. This inability of mine to impugn their felicitous vision of themselves and everything else only bolstered his point. Whatever he was, Dr. O was a creature who could flourish in the worst conditions—if only until his day finally came—and this gift went a long way toward confirming his authority to direct the lives of defective persons such as myself.

For me, the consequence of being out of work, which was both a cause for and result of my turning to the services of Dr. O, led me to overlook that his base of operations was situated in what was known as the “battleground district.” I was on my last legs when I saw Dr. O's advertisement in the classified section of a local publication I found abandoned in the booth of one of the cheap diners where I was taking my meals at the time—and thereafter, if truth be told. To an emotional wreck, the words “fair rates,” which were featured in the classified ad, were good enough reason to overlook a great deal on the side of safety with respect to the “battleground district.” For a time, Dr. O even took me in when I was at my lowest point. He also treated me on an installment plan once I revealed financial documentation of my embarrassed circumstances. “You'll find something soon enough,” he told me. “I'm sure of it.”

As it happened, the reason Dr. O could be sure of my finding gainful work was that he referred me to a variety of temporary services with which he was associated, arranging for them to hand over my wages directly to his keeping. In turn, his therapeutic treatment of me began, followed soon after by a more ambitious program of guided meditation.

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At this juncture, the average individual might doubt my intelligence in agreeing to Dr. O's stipulations regarding my work life. But my intelligence was by no means at issue during this time in my life. Instead, the behavior I manifested was entirely dictated by my state of demoralization. In fact, the whole of my existence had been critically demoralized for one reason or another. From my earliest days, I was un-

well with more than my share of childhood diseases. Of course there may be people who have had a diseased childhood without having a bad childhood. But good, bad, or indifferent, my diseased childhood seems in retrospect to have laid the foundation of my subsequent years, which, as I am with difficulty trying to depict, had been years of severe demoralization.

To pursue this subject from another angle, it is not necessarily true that a diseased physical life is the cause of a diseased mental life. Such calculations of cause and effect are too simplistic. More probable is that a diseased physical life may be the cause of an active—meaning overly active—mental life, a life in which mental phenomena predominate and may even seem to have objective form. As everyone learns who has been attentive to their own thoughts, what manifests in one's brain is often directly traceable to what is happening in some other part of one's body. And if a disease is happening in some other part of one's body—or in the whole of one's body, as occurred during my childhood—then you can be sure of having an overly active mental life, even to the extent, as I have said, of perceiving mental phenomena as equally real, or more so, than physical phenomena. When the rest of your body is lying inactive because of an illness, or thrashing with fever and the dream occasions of fever, your brain is left to compensate for this inactivity by overactivity. It only makes sense.

In the end, what I am attempting to communicate is this: my childhood disease made me a thoughtful person, overly so, and too much thinking leads to clinical demoralization, which must be abundantly evident from the previous few thousand words I have written. And therein is the reason

that I acceded to Dr. O's overseeing of my work life and control of my finances. In addition, our arrangement enabled me to afford the modest rates he charged for my therapy and meditational instruction, and at the same time allowed me to live a somewhat decent life in a one-bedroom apartment. In that place, I was harassed by disturbing dream occasions each night, including dream occasions about the Dealer who saw that I was in the market for an “all-new context,” the dream occasion that Dr. O said was merely “interesting” because it was so open to exegesis concerning what I must admit was my diseased mental life. What I did mention to Dr. O was the Dealer's characterization of me as a “metaphysical mutant.” Here would be an apt place to explain some things about my upbringing and, more strikingly, my heredity.

I was raised in various foster homes, a cast-off infant found in a bus station lavatory who subsequently became part of the government's child services system. For most of my life, though, I never had a hint of my genealogy, not that I had any reason to be excessively curious. I had my interests, but the identity of my begetters wasn't one of them. Actually, it seemed something of a vulgar topic to my way of thinking. Then one day, soon after I had to leave my long-time position at a publishing firm because of my debilitating mental state and prior to my becoming a client of Dr. O, I received a letter with no return address. It was postmarked somewhere in the southern region of the country, specifically a region that might have been within the “swamplands” that the Dealer mentioned in the dream occasion at the opening of this autobiographical confession or complaint. Since leaving my job, moving in with Dr. O for a time, and then relocating to a one-bedroom apartment, I have lost all

but a few pages of the letter and the envelope in which it was contained. For a time I thought the letter was a ruse of some kind, especially given the integration of articulate learnedness and plain idiocy within it. But later it began to take on meaning when incorporated within the whole of my biography. In my effort to explain something of my origins and heredity, and perhaps suggest other qualities of my life and character, I will transcribe those pages below, somewhat edited for clarity.

... and so, as I was spraying, cousin, “spraying” you see, jeez sometimes I crack myself up, we orphaned you without meaning anything by it, left you behind in that bus station toilet, nothing personal, we just forgot, having such a big family and all. We had all gone to town to see one of those horror movies where northern folks get massacred by backwoods hicks so inbred, as I should know, that their females can reproduce by what you call parthenogenesis, no joke, while the males sodomize farm animals and unfortunate Yankees who stray onto their property. Southern pride notwithstanding, we love those pictures about swamp-dwelling, murdering crackers, by my granddaddy's crusty asshole we do, never seen a roll of toilet paper in his miserable life. Not that we're much better off. Damn if we ain't shotgun-shack poor. Why, just the other week, me and Clem, my half-ass brother got the other half bit off by a gator, had to bear-trap a couple of tourists wandered into the swamp, probably sight-seeing or whatnot, to get some money so's we could keep the electricity on, otherwise we might fall down the hole in our parlor room where we shit and piss and other

things, snicker. Yankees they was of course. Screamed like coons on fire, yes they did, before Clem put ‘em outta their misery by blasting their brains with daddy's good old rifle what once went off whilst our common sire was picking his nose with the barrel end of it. Clem's got the gift of doing business with that piece. He's got other gifts, too, like being able to draw you into his dreams, sometimes you don't know you're even in there until a zombie or suchlike comes after you or the planets start moving in funny ways. But shooting's his speciality, even if he's got no more than two fingers, the other eight being bit off by our dear mother in the fires of holy passion whilst they was at the business of making three of our half-brothers, two sisters, sundry half-and-halfs, as we call ‘em, and them such that live in the cellar, don't rightly know how to go about describing them or how they got that way. Sometimes they send up vibrations like they was angered, though mostly they leave the rest of us be. All family freaks considered, though, there's not a fag among us, even if sometimes it can be difficult to say when we's all in the dark, which is most nights, our troubled standing with the state power system being what it is, and because there just ain't enough tourist gold, as Clem likes to say, to keep the lights on as much as we'd like. We can make fire with our eyes sometimes, but nobody's ever got rich doing that, least that I know. Which puts me in mind of those redskins used to live back here in the swamp with us before they got themselves plumb flush with them casinos, seems a white man can hardly get his due in this sun-don't-shine state, God bless the confederate dead and them of us who's among them with our good lord, including my little sister, sent up to heaven by our daddy's squirrel-stick of a rifle went

off whilst he was having his way with her, didn't know the thing was loaded no more than he did when he was digging for that nostril meat he loved more than the family dog's hind parts. Blowed his head so far off it went straight through the roof of our home and outhouse, which weren't no loss, the rest of him putting us in Sunday dinners for weeks, waste not whatnot, fried in a pan of possum fat and we got us a feast, woulda been the envy of the neighbors if Clem hadn't got to them some years past, sucked them into one of his dreams and left them there for the zombies most probably. We'd never been on good terms with those folk anyway. It was them or us. Sometimes we get mad at Clem for disappearing walking food when we're half-starved. Meat's meat and a man's gotta eat, like the cannibal guy says in that movie we went to see back when we left you in the bus station shitter. He planted ‘em in the ground up to their head, fed ‘em till they was fat, then harvested ‘em like turnips. They didn't have a jew's chance in a Baptist pitch-tent of worship. We tried to do much the same with a tourist fella called himself an anthropologist. He made for good company for a time, though, till he finally got us all agitated with his funny talk. He was yakking a blue streak whilst Clem and I was conferring on whether to use the ax to split him down the middle or fillet his pasty skin with the hunting knife and use his hide to fix up the roof where daddy's head went through. That anthropologist fella kind of sounded like the guy gave me your address, name of Dealer. Odd type he was and not to be trifled with. Even Clem felt a queer horror of the man. Seemed to blink in and out before your eyes as you was talking to him. Called us metaphysical mutants, at least I think those were his words. Anywhat, he

conveyed that you might appreciate a holler from your kin folks, sorry again how things turned out. Hope you don't—

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So ended what remained of the letter. I think the reader can appreciate from it not only something of my origins and heredity, but also the uncanny reference to the Dealer, still a figure of my dream occasions at that time but one that now filled my mind with a chilling perplexity, particularly with respect to mental phenomena transposed within a physical universe. This feeling was greatly deepened in the next session I had with Dr. O. I mentioned that I continued to have dreams of the Dealer, in at least one of which Dr. O's name arose in a context I could not recall. Instantly, my therapist and guru went pale. He was also quite obviously at pains to force out his next sentence: "Did the Dealer say anything about an all-new context?"

"I believe so," I said. "He almost always does."

At these words, Dr. O visibly shuddered and the file on me that was on his lap nearly fell to the floor. He recovered the folder, however, and hastily wrote something before straightening its pages and securing it in a metal drawer. We then moved on to my meditation instruction, employing a new technique that was supposed to be more effective in quelling my incessant cogitation and, in turn, lightening my demoralized state as a human being who, like most human beings, had no focused idea of what it meant to exist in the world but had to get on with things in any case, whether demoralized or, ideally, in a more or less complacent manner. Roughly speaking, these are the only two ways one can exist,

whatever one's context in the universe, and whatever destiny has dealt you within that context, as I later came to understand more profoundly. Actively seeking an all-new context was, of course, quite another matter, and quite an unusual one.

Following my meditation practice that day, Dr. O sent me packing. That is how I thought of his manner toward me as I reflected on it later in the day. *Dr. O sent me packing*, I said aloud while standing at the kitchen sink in my one-bedroom apartment. He was practically pushing me out the door as I was asking him if he would rather I did not speak of the Dealer in future sessions. In a haughty tone, he said that whatever I determined to speak of or not speak of in our sessions was entirely my decision. Once outside, I heard the door behind me slammed shut and locked.

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Despite Dr. O's seeming dismissal of our discussion regarding the Dealer as well as the business of an all-new context, I continued to have dream occasions in which both played a central role. One of them took place in a setting I had often frequented in my dreaming life. I viewed this visionary environment much the same as I did the Dealer's "chain of galaxies" showroom, which is to say that it seemed to me an analogue of the waking world, however superficially at odds they appeared. In these dreams, I would always be in what I can only describe as a multi-level bazaar, a marketplace without borders that was filled with what seemed an infinite number of crumbling structures of all shapes, many of them with odd, unnamable objects arranged behind warped windowpanes—contorted blobs and twisted figur-

ines contrived and aligned to forbidding effect. And everywhere there were carts with grotesque merchandise dangling from canopies with a leathery appearance, a dried and cracked material that I knew to be human flesh. Both above and below me were dark expanses of jagged stairways and corridors, fragile walkways between tilting towers, and undulating ramps that spiraled down into shadowy depths and upwards into shadowy heights. It was on one of these ramps high above me that I spied the Dealer, who called my name in a reverberant voice. I moved toward him but realized with frustration that I had no idea how he could be reached. Then suddenly I was standing before him. He started walking away from me, gesturing over his shoulder for me to follow, yelling over the din around us, “I got this place cheap. Much better than my old one, don't you think?”

I had to agree with him, if only because the shambles surrounding us was just a pile of my own dream manifestations. On that occasion I had a fixed awareness that I was dreaming, which has its benefits and drawbacks depending on how much control I can exert over my surroundings. In the next instant, the Dealer and I were sitting on crates across from each other in what appeared to be a storage room for a manufacturing plant of some kind.

“So,” the Dealer began. “Your all-new context. Should we proceed?”

“I can't answer to a mystery. And would my answer make any difference?”

“Not really,” he said. “But I don't believe you will object to what is on order.”

“It shouldn't matter whether I object or not. I'm lucid at the moment, if you haven't noticed.”

“Nevertheless, you could lose control just like that,” said the Dealer, snapping his fingers. I knew he was right, so I refrained from making a fuss. The last thing I wanted was to find myself crawling through an ever-narrowing tunnel with some monstrosity at my heels. “However,” the Dealer continued, “I absolutely know you will not object.”

“I object to all things but one—euthanasia by anesthetic. You know that, among other things about me.”

“Yes. Not even a generation from the swamplands where you and yours fermented into the metaphysical mutants you are. But you are more advanced than they. And you have followed all instructions to the letter.”

“In your dreams I have.”

“Actually, they're your dreams. But why split hairs?”

“What about my all-new context?”

“Well, it's not all that new. If you've noticed, things have been trending in a certain direction in that… other world, so to speak.”

“I'm a demoralized metaphysical mutant. You don't have to tell me.”

“I guess there's some satisfaction in being right. I'm just the Dealer, so what do I know?”

“I don't want to be right. I want to be dead.”

“You're guaranteed that. But I know what you're saying.”

“So?”

“Ask Dr. O the next time you see him. He'll fix you up. The world needs metaphysical mutants like you to get where it's going.”

“And where is it going?”

“Ask Dr. O. He'll fix you up.”

“Where is it going?”

“He'll fix you up.”

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That was it. I lost all control of my lucid dream occasion and awoke with the Dealer's mechanistically repeated phrase about being “fixed up” resonating in my mind. And the word “demoralization” was laid bare as the euphemism it was for the spectrum of astonishing harm our species had ever endured and its *trending* in a certain direction all the more strange and excruciating. Such as it was with our individual lives—from their initiation to their end—so it was with a universal process of disintegration and derangement. As above, so below… and as below, so above. There was magic in things after all, or so it seemed—a metaphysical ideal of the immaterial devolved into appearances. What mockery that I should be part of this movement, a mutant designated to mutilate further the wreckage of the cosmos. Nevertheless, while all signs indicated the substance of what I had experienced, the real still remained as good as a guess. It always has. Yet the nightmare obtains sure, and sometimes may be shared.

Hours later, I was still possessed by the blackest demoralization I had ever known. As the sun rose that day, its harsh light glaring upon the cityscape beyond my apartment window, I wanted nothing more than to meet with Dr. O. Why I desired this meeting was past my understanding. He had done little or nothing so far to help me aside from arranging for me to work at temporary jobs for which I was completely unsuited. But he was familiar with my dream occasions featuring the Dealer. This fact made him the only person with whom I could share the demoralization I now felt due to my

latest encounter with this figure. Of course, in the most recent session during which I mentioned the Dealer and my dreams about him, Dr. O dismissed the matter. But he also sent me packing. And he failed to notify me of his new address, which I found was a walk-up above an old house that was inconveniently situated close to some railroad tracks where the noise and vibrations of passing trains were a regular occurrence. Thus, I could only conclude that Dr. O wanted to be rid of me as a client, which was no great revelation. For my part, the only reason I made it my business to find him time and again was my need for a means to live in my one-bedroom apartment. But now I wanted nothing more than to avail myself of Dr. O's mental health services.

Because Dr. O had not provided me with any way to otherwise contact him, I was forced to show up at his office without scheduling an appointment ahead of time. Nevertheless, he politely, though not enthusiastically, said that he could make some time for me before his next client arrived. When I stepped inside his office, which was actually just a small and sparely furnished room, I was shocked to see that the place looked as if it had not been cleaned for some time. Similarly, Dr. O was slovenly dressed and conspicuously ill-groomed, his signature natty appearance nowhere in evidence. I could not pretend that his transformation had escaped my notice.

“I've been ill. Please have a seat,” he said, waving a limp hand toward one of the chairs in the room. Dr. O settled himself on a sofa but did not sit in his usual cross-legged posture. “What brings you here?”

I told him about my dream occasion with the Dealer and my subsequent state of demoralization. Considering his pre-

vious dismissal of this subject, I suppose I should not have been surprised that he ignored everything I said. Instead, he seemed to sink deep into himself. Then he started up with his usual therapeutic and spiritual hogwash. The homily he delivered was an apologetics for pain in the world, a mouthful of emptiness that he seemed to have adopted specifically for me as a demoralized wretch and potential suicide. He said something about the diversity of sensations that we might call good or bad, though in reality they were more akin to musical tones that collectively produced a cosmic work of music. Already I was growing impatient with this hackneyed metaphor that I supposed was Dr. O's attempt to portray disease and agony in human life as no more than grace notes in the ultimate harmony of existence. It was all just so much rationalization, of course, but his words did not contain the usual force and refinement Dr. O customarily mustered. Indeed, he spoke in an embarrassingly diffident and awkward manner. He actually stuttered while talking of humanity's cries of misery and the yowls of ecstasy, the whole racket of the world, all of which fused into some kind of magnificent symphony. And he gesticulated all over the place as if he were swatting away a swarm of flying insects attacking him. Finally, he fell silent at the obviously tired and borrowed nature of his dharma speech, as he might have styled it. Then he altered his rhetorical strategy. At first his words were no less tired and borrowed than before. Although he was no longer gesticulating, he continued somewhat awkwardly, more haltingly I would say, in the transmission of his message.

"Stop!" I shouted. "Just admit it. You're a fraud."

Dr. O smiled sadly. “It took you all this time to notice that? Usually, I'm spotted for what I am after three sessions, six at the most. But you let me run your whole life. It just got to be too much, even for me.”

“That's why you started moving around? So I couldn't find you? Come on.”

“Okay, so you're not as stupid as I thought you were.”

“You always knew what I wanted. I thought if I waited long enough you'd oblige a longtime client. I knew you had the resources. That's why you were avoiding me.”

He fell silent and just stared into my eyes. “At first that was the reason. I didn't want to do it. You know, morals and such. And you were really beyond saving. ‘Demoralization’ was your word, but I knew it was something far more pathological than that. At one point I thought I might be able to do something for you. Then I came to my senses. It was that Dealer business.”

“Don't tell me that a few of my dreams put a scare into you.”

“No. It wasn't then. It was when I saw him sitting on the lid of the toilet seat in my bathroom one morning. He was sort of blinking in and out. I thought that you had infected me somehow with your insane dreams. I sidled out of the bathroom without turning around. When I reached the living room, right on that spot just behind you, he was standing there. I seemed to be trapped in a humdrum horror movie, but that's not how it felt.”

“And he said things.”

“Yeah, he said things alright. Now look at me. I've turned into you.”

“What did he say?”

“When someone's standing in your living room blinking off and on like a defective light bulb, it shorts out your brain.”

“Unless you're a degenerate swamp dweller, or one of their descendants. A metaphysical mutant.”

“What?”

“Never mind. What did he say?”

“All I remember was that he told me things that nobody could know. It was as if he plugged his brain into mine and pumped into me everything in the world, everything in the whole universe. And other stuff I can't even explain. First I thought I was going to explode. Then anything that I thought was my life as I knew it, that I thought was real, just being alive—it all drained out of me until there was nothing left. And I dropped in a dead faint to the floor. When I came to he was gone.”

“And now you've become me.”

“That's how it seems. I'm sorry I didn't listen to what you said to me on all those visits. But I had to keep up appearances.”

“It wouldn't have done any good. You know that now.”

“Sure I do. However I run it through my head, I keep coming up with the same conclusion, the same way out.”

“What about my suggestion, then? It would be elegant. It would be effective.”

“I know. I have what I need. What we need. I was only waiting for you to show up, as you always do. You know, it's really all your fault that I've come to this.”

“You're the fraud. You invited it on yourself.”

“That's how I ended up thinking about it. Funny almost. A small-time fraud stumbling onto... I don't even know what

to call it."

"Schemes of immense repercussions. Or demoralization in all its facets and aspects. Terminal demoralization. We're a dime a dozen."

"I'm going to make it up to you."

"I know. The Dealer said you'd fix me up."

Olan left the room. It was not long before he returned bearing two filled and capped syringes. One of them was placed in a sealed plastic bag, which he handed to me. Rightly assuming I had never intravenously injected myself, he pushed up one of my shirt sleeves. With two fingers he tapped the veins on the inner side of my arm.

"This one," he said. "First drink a couple glasses of water to raise it up. Then you just slide it in and push the plunger. Can you do that?"

"I'm sure of it. Thank you."

I had it now. It was all I ever wanted.

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When I was back in my one-bedroom apartment, I sat quiet and motionless in a reupholstered chair, the syringe on the table beside me. There were sounds from outside the walls and windows around me—cars, people talking, music from an ice cream truck. None of it meant anything. The world was mutating, its every organism trending toward an ultimate derangement. It was not an all-new context, just the way things always had been. Death was guaranteed, as the Dealer put it. Harm was guaranteed. It was not as if what was happening had not been in the works for millennia. I imagined everything I had dreamed as being the truth without question. Maybe something became impatient with

earthly evolution, something that was not good or evil, not moral or immoral, something that was just in motion. It was in front of us all the time, but no one saw it, no one wanted to see it. I found that annoying. I had been demoralized for so long, and all I ever wanted was to get on with the inevitable. Moreover, I wanted to do it in my own good time and with respect and understanding, not hindered and hated because *I was not for this world*. Hence, I feel it my moral right—real or irreal—to leave a suicide note expressing my ire to the unwitting doomed, the ones who, as has ever been their wont, will spurn and decry such a document. Better still, let the following be known as my Suicide Declaration.

Those who contest demoralization as the inexorable way of universal deliverance have failed to see what is before them. They have lagged behind in the evolutionary ideal of our species. That ideal is a beneficial mutation. If nothing else, the demoralized are fortuitous mutants. From the day that marked our kind's awakening to life, such mutants have borne the common task of attaining for the world its true status and to announce its arrival in a time to come. Now it has fallen to demoralized mutants to enunciate their closed-off future. Of all others, they have been assigned with the venture of depressing the inhabitants of the earth, so that the horrors of existence may perish by an entropic process of moral deterioration culminating in a psychically pristine posterity. Into their tremulous hands has been passed an urgency to have these horrors die along with the vessels that contain them, and until then to edify those who endorse in action or a complicity of silence the horrors that flourish in daylight and dark. Any who doubt that the foregoing is truly the case only indict themselves of a willing blindness and de-

praved ignorance. Those who accept the lines herein are already in good standing with the mutations of a redemptive demoralization. As for the ones who still practice and profit from horrors, they must be condemned not because they are wickedly content with dozing in sick dreams, which their benighted state renders them helpless to disjoin themselves, but because they are not on the path of a saving self-mutation. They are obstacles to the future and what it wants. The consummate invention of our species' mutants, the future longs for peace and freedom from suffering toward which demoralization points the way; that is, it seeks wholeheartedly an eliminative attitude against all manifestations throughout the universe. Such has been the stance of all mutant liberators by demoralization who have ever lived. As one, their voices have spoken of an end-point to the organic horror. None has ever been fully heard or impeccably followed. They have merely shown the way. This way has always been implicit in their ideal. Closer it draws with the appearance of the demoralized greater in number and more clear-eyed in purpose. This is the way of the future. All who do not know the way, or who refuse it, will be denied the faintest glimpse of the absolute of an anesthetized future. They are reprobate losers waiting only to be declared as such by tomorrow's demoralized mutants. So it will be. We are each either among the demoralized showing the way to a future of eternal nightmare, or we are losers celebrating our moment in hell.

The Small People (2014 The Spectral Link Version)

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Coming of age in this world has always been a strange process. I'm sure you understand, Doctor. There are so many adjustments that need to be made before we are presentable in company. We don't understand all the workings, all the stages of development in the process of becoming who we are and what we are. It can be so difficult. Others expected me to be complete at a certain age, ready to jump up and take my place when called to do so. “Time to wake up,” they said. “Time to do this or time to do that,” they said. “It's show time,” they said. And I had better be willing and able when the time came.

Please excuse my outburst, Doctor. I'm doing my best. I know my lines. I've told this story before, as you know. And I do want to be good this time. My parents were always scolding me to be good about one thing or another. “You came from a good family,” they frequently said to me, as if saying I was biologically their own could make it so. Now, I cannot claim that their criticism of certain attitudes I held was unmerited. My mother and father resorted to using the words *shameful little bigot* quite a bit. “How could we have raised such a shameful little bigot?” she would say to him or he would say to her. “He doesn't get it from my side of the

family," one of them would shout. And then the other, right on cue, would respond, "Well, he doesn't get it from mine either." There it was again—the genetic issue, which might have upset me had I been older and wise to the fact that my status in the family was but a legal fiction. In light of later events, of course, biology was the least of our differences. This is a very delicate topic for me, as you know.

Moving on, my parents would then fight, if only for the sake of appearances, speaking the same lines they'd spoken before. Back and forth, back and forth they'd go at each other. Then finally they'd come back around to their little boy, who was such a shameful little bigot. Obviously, it wasn't in their interest to acknowledge the truth—that foremost I was afraid, not bigoted. Calling me bigoted was simply a tactic for confusing the issue. Any hatred I displayed was epiphenomenal to my fear. Every child has his fears, and the worst of mine was a fear of *them*. Not my mother and father. Well, I was afraid of them, too—that's not unusual. But as a child I didn't hate them. I hated those others—the *small people*.

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One time my parents and I were on vacation. My father was at the wheel. He was smiling slightly and staring with concentration. That was how he always looked, even when he wasn't driving—always smiling slightly and always staring with concentration. Next to him my mother sat quietly. The sun was shining on her smooth face. She had such a smooth face, Doctor, and big eyes. I was sitting in the middle of the back seat, minding my own business and taking in the wide spaces of the scenery, not focusing on anything in par-

ticular. Then I saw the sign just off the right side of the road. It had one of those simple faces on it, and written below were the words: SMALL COUNTRY. My whole body tightened, as it always did when I saw one of those road signs. The arrow at the bottom of the sign pointed straight up, so that drivers would know they were in range of small country.

I slid over to the right side of the car and began to survey the landscape. A short distance from the road we were on was another road, a smaller road. It meandered through an open plain slightly below us. I shifted my eyes toward the front seat and saw my father looking in the rearview mirror at me. But I didn't care. This was the closest I had ever been to small country, and I wanted to see all I could, which for a long while wasn't anything except that empty plain with that small road passing through it. Such is the perversity born of fear. At the same time that I wanted to see something, I was terrified of what I might see. I felt as if I were having one of those dreams where you're alone but still feel the presence of something unimaginably awful that might appear all of a sudden. It was at the height of this nightmarish sensation that I saw the little car turning a bend in the small road. About the same time, our road—the big road—started curving toward the other. The closer the little car came to us, the more I felt the urge to dive to the floor of our car. But then I would have missed seeing them.

Their car, the little car, looked like a toy. It wasn't exactly its size that demoted it from a properly motorized conveyance to a plaything, because the pretend car wasn't so near our real car that I could compare the two. It was the flagrant actuality that everything about it was toy-like, as if it were

made of molded plastic and rolling along on teetering wheels. And it bore none of the details on it of a real car, at least that I could tell. Structurally, it had a simple square body painted bright red. That had to be the color, of course, just so that it would stand out in the scene, and I could be all the more afraid than if its color had been white or yellow or some shade of blue. But I stopped attending to the car once I saw what was inside.

Until then, I scarcely had a glimpse of any small people. My strange fear of them originated mostly from the simple face on the road signs that alerted people, real people, of their impending entry into small country. The mere idea of the smalls was enough to make me anxious about something I couldn't name. And after looking into that red plastic toy, I was sorry I hadn't thrown myself down onto the floor of our car, even knowing that my parents would have called me a shameful little bigot for the rest of the vacation.

After our cars passed each other, my father looked in the rearview mirror and said to me, “So, did you see them?” I didn't say anything. I was defiantly silent.

“Your father asked you a question,” said my mother. “You should answer him.” But I maintained my silence. And if I had spoken, I wouldn't have said anything about what I saw in that car. I wasn't even afraid at that point. I was bitter and resentful that my father could have asked me in such a bland tone of voice if I saw them. I wanted to scream at both my parents, scream murderously and also with some puzzlement, a plea for understanding. How could people, big people, have such a complacent attitude toward the smalls? How could they give certain presents to children for their birthday or any time presents were in order when those

presents might look like that little car and the small people inside it? They were travesties of real people, that's all they were—two older small people, like a father and mother, in the front seats, and two young small people, whose gender I couldn't tell at a distance, sitting rigidly in the back. How could there even exist certain toys, for instance an imitation baking oven—a play version of the real thing, yet one that quite probably replicated the actual baking ovens used by the small people? Even if the resemblance wasn't one-to-one between the two miniature ovens, the thought could still enter a child's head, “This oven must be something like those the small people have in their kitchens.” Who could be so stupid or malicious that they could ignore the possibility of such a thing—that an object some children might have in front of them, or even in their little hands, could have a counterpart in small country? It was too monstrous to contemplate that at a certain age children can and do become cognizant of the likeness of their toys to entities in the small country world, including the small people who live there, if they are even alive. Why didn't they react, as I had, with fear and hatred once they came of a certain age?

Naturally, I knew that for practical reasons the world of the smalls and the real world were securely set apart, just as borders between places of divergent laws and customs were partitioned and even guarded with powerful weapons against each other. But it wasn't the same between the smalls and everyone else. This was something I felt deep inside me, though I risked being stigmatized as a shameful little bigot not only by my parents but also by most anyone wherever I went.

For the rest of our vacation that year, I was miserably anxious as well as miserably hateful. From the moment my father asked me if I saw what was in that little toy car, my hatred for the small people that grew out of my fear of them reached its zenith and held there. Of course, I had seen them, idiot father of mine. Why did he ridicule me, taking their side? At one point, all of the occupants of the little car suddenly swiveled their heads toward us, then abruptly swiveled them back to their previously fixed positions. To my mind, they did this as if to say, "We know you are looking at us. Now we are looking at you. Now you know that we knew you were looking at us. And henceforth there will be no escaping this mutual knowledge." *Those damn swivel-heads*, I thought, even though I could only imagine what went on in their heads, because in fact they appeared to have nothing going on inside them. They were just hollow, empty things.

Not long after this encounter, my father pointed out the window. By the side of the road was another sign with one of those simple faces on it. Below that face were the words: LEAVING SMALL COUNTRY.

"All clear," my father said with a vexing condescension in his voice and a slight smile on his face.

"Oh, leave the boy alone," my mother said, but only as a sort of warning that my father was taking things too far. Right then, I could have thrown a fit the likes of which my parents had never seen or suspected of me. Nor was it wholly improbable that I might have leapt into the front seat and steered our car into the roadside ditch, which was of some depth. I might have killed us all, or perhaps only my father and mother. But then, in a flash of mentation, it occurred to

me that with the demise of my parents I would likely fall under the care of another couple whose attitude toward my fear and hatred of the small people probably would not have differed from theirs. Certainly my disposition was not in line with that of the larger share of humanity. In good faith, I have to admit as much, Doctor. I know you must be aware of the torment an individual suffers when he begins to wonder if he is the one on the wrong side of reality. Perhaps it was a defensive tactic of my mind, then, that though I was still afflicted by fright and hatred when it came to the small people, I also felt for the first time a curiosity about them. Surely that signaled a healthier perspective, and I welcomed it.

My newfound curiosity waxed and waned for about a year or so. It either intensified or abated depending on how often I awoke sweating with sick horror after dreaming about the small people. I finally acted on my curiosity only after I had a dream in which real people, including myself, were somehow changed either into small people or *half-small people*. The latter particularly disturbed me. *Yes*, I thought, *now is the time*. And so I began my quest to get to the bottom of the mystery that, at least for me, surrounded the small people.

The library seemed the natural starting point to research my subject. In no time at all, it seemed, I could find out all I needed to know about the small people. And possibly what I learned would terminate, or at least temper, my fear of them, and even alleviate, or dissolve entirely, my hatred of their kind. But I was only a child with a rudimentary conception of how things truly were in this world at its deepest level. I found out soon enough, though, that I had misled myself.

I was ahead of my class in school and knew my way around a library better than most children my age. Thus, you can imagine my devastation when I failed to unearth any substantive information about the small people. How could there be such a gap in what would seem a vital realm of study—what conspiracy of silence, what code of secrecy was in effect that I could find hardly a mention of these creatures, not even in the form of records or statistics relating to them? Yet ultimately I was forced to conclude that nothing was being hidden from me or the rest of the world on the subject I attempted to investigate. At least, it wasn't being hidden deliberately, consciously. That would have been an impossible task. Some blabbermouth is always around who is unable to keep what he knows to himself—chatterboxes without whom the details of humanity's most lurid episodes would be lost—let alone something as conspicuous as the small people. No, Doctor, only one thing could keep them out of the limelight—pure neglect, a protective disinterest, as the old philosophers of the human psyche might have seen it: the mind's looking away when unsettling facts come into view, facts that one would rather not focus on for long. Where the small people were concerned, there was nearly a blackout of intelligence.

I'm not saying that no one has ever ruminated on the phenomenon of the small people. No doubt everyone has pondered their existence at some time or another. But such considerations have never been sustained long enough to create a body of inquiry and knowledge. Before pen could be put to paper or an expedition launched, some negating incuriosity set in that dissipated any spur to action, or any action that resulted in authoritative books and peer-reviewed

essays in specialized journals—all that might comprise a modest shelf even in the middling libraries of our world. If you should say that even highly arcane matters, not to mention anything right before our eyes, have evaded the closest research, I would have to respond, perhaps a bit vigorously —*false*. Question: How could we know we were keeping certain truths from ourselves regarding how things truly are in this world at its deepest level? Answer: Because we have done it before. Do I really need to give particulars? And many continue the charade long after some voice indicates beyond credible doubt what is true and what is not. *The time has not come yet*, I thought. And perhaps it never would.

In point of fact, though, I must admit to having heard vague mutterings about the small people when I was at the library that day. For instance, I came across a history book—that is, a book concerned with *our* history—and in its index there was a reference to a footnote in which the author alluded to the small people. In that footnote were written the words: "Of course they have no recorded history of their own." Naturally, this scrupulous scholar adduced his source for this assertion in the usual style, and it made me so happy to read the arid citation "See Paulson," or maybe it was "Hayworth," possibly "Heywood." Whomever I was told to see, I sought out. But nothing was contained there—nothing to corroborate that the small people had no recorded history of their own. Why would a scholar of any standing slip up that way, leading the reader to a source that did not support what he had written? Mistakes do happen, no doubt about that. But how could it be that they happened whenever someone wrote something about the small people, as I discovered they always did? All day long, one book led me to

another and each left me empty-handed. Was I being diverted here and there by falsehoods, or were bits of truth being parceled out in such a way that no complete picture formed of the small people, or none that could be placed beside the one we had of ourselves in the great photo-album of humankind—a portrait that itself began to seem incomplete to a child who believed until then that we knew everything that had anything to do with our world? The big world, that is.

During the hours I spent that day in the library, I went from basement to belfry, only to find myself cornered by the walls of one dead end after another. With studious intent I walked into a repository of learning with the light of a beautiful morning shining upon me and my self-appointed mission. But great clouds rolled in, thunder shook the walls, rain tapped louder and louder against the windows and lightning flashed outside them. By degrees, the neat hallways of the library I had entered turned to dank and dripping stonework corridors of a Gothic castle through which I wandered in search of a way out. I trembled as if trapped in one of those dreams of mine where I feel surrounded by unseen horrors. At last, all I wanted was to wake up. But I couldn't awake, not until I had some answers. Abandoning the library in disgust, I returned home and moped about for weeks in a stupor of desperation and nervous suspicion.

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Not long after that inauspicious day of wasted labor, something happened that helped me come back to myself, such as I was, while also advancing my obsession with the swivel-heads. Until then, I was no expert at making friends. How unexpected it was, then, that I should make a friend

when I needed one most. I was so surprised because nothing in my life had ever worked out that way. For once, I actually gained an advantage over my circumstances.

It was after school, after the time between leaving home to go to school in the morning and leaving school in the afternoon to go back home, where I waited for it to be time for dinner, time for doing homework, and then other times until it was time to go to bed before it was time to wake up again and face another round of times to do things. In any case, on the day in question I made friends with this other boy. The reason for this fortuitous bond was that he spoke the following words: “Damn those small people.” I asked him why he said that. I also asked if he was afraid of the small people as I was afraid of them. He said he wasn't afraid of the small people, but I didn't believe him because of the way he said this. His eyes looked away from me, and he started to fidget. His voice became very quiet, too, until he stopped talking altogether and just stared at the ground. Then he looked up at me, shaking off the fear that possessed him, and said in a boisterous voice, “I'm not afraid of those dummy-things. I just hate them.”

I smiled and said, “I call them swivel-heads. And I hate them, too.”

Immediately we became friends and began spending time together every day after school, that is, until it was time for us to go home for dinner and then go through all the other times there were. We played games the way young people do, or are supposed to do at that stage of development. We wrestled quite a bit, but there wasn't anything mean or crazy about it. We also talked a lot about the small people. One

theme of conversation to which we often returned involved catching one of the smalls and what we'd do when we did.

"I'd twist its arms until they were backwards." To me, that seemed like something you could actually do to the small people, even if my only basis for this conviction was a brief sighting of them while on vacation a few years before. "Then it would have to do everything turned around, like eating with its back to the dinner table, if they even eat. It would have to reach for its food without being able to see it," my friend speculated, warming to his vision. I pictured the scene for a moment.

"Yeah," I said.

We laughed quite a bit about small people whose arms and also legs we had twisted backwards, as well as other things we would do if we caught one of them. Eventually, we became so exhausted from laughing that we were out of breath and had to sit quietly for a while. That was when my friend smiled at me in a certain way. Not smiling slightly like my father did, but smiling as if he was thinking something very particular, looking at me with a questioning expression on his face. And right then I had the feeling I could read his mind and he could read mine. From that moment, we became more serious in our talks about the swivel-headed dummy-things. My friend also shared with me a secret. What he told me was that his father—maybe his mother, too—also hated the small people. "My grandfather hated them even more. He thought all sorts of things about them and what he called their *powers*." Then my friend confided that his father always knew the location of small country, and their family moved every so often to avoid it. "We're going to be moving again pretty soon. Dad says that the smalls are

too close already... and they're getting closer every day. He even let me know where new small country is going up, so I won't get too near it."

Not long after that day, I asked my parents if I could sleep over at my friend's house. He did the same, asking his parents if he could sleep over at my house. Our ruse worked, and on the night we were supposed to sleep over at each other's houses we instead met at a pre-arranged location—the lavatory hut in the old park on the edge of town. When I entered the small wooden building, my friend was already studying a wrinkled piece of notebook paper on which he had drawn a map. "Here's where the small country is going to be," he said, pointing to a place a few miles outside the town's limits. "It's secluded right now, my dad said." According to my friend, however, it wouldn't be long before the signs were put up and everyone would know it was there. "Not that they could do anything about it," my friend said.

"Yeah," I replied, knowing that whoever complained would be called a shameful bigot or some roughly equivalent term of reproach. As my friend and I sat cross-legged on the floor of the lavatory hut, it became increasingly apparent that neither of us was entirely dedicated to our plan of stealing our way into the presently secluded region of small country and capturing one of its residents. And the longer we waited, the more our project deteriorated into something ill-conceived and probably unfeasible. Ultimately, though, our doubts were overcome by our hatred.

"The small people," my friend said. That was all—just three words spoken in a tense, quiet voice. Yet those words gave vent to a rage at something that had seized his life. I looked at him and saw all second thoughts written on his

face transform into a spirit of determination. No doubt he saw my own features overtaken by the same spirit.

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We entered the secluded small country by way of a little road that was in the process of construction. Some small children were loitering in the area. Construction sites are always a temptation for children, though these small children weren't behaving in the usually rambunctious manner one might expect if they had been real children. They didn't see us, or so we assumed. But it wasn't long before they started to walk away from the hidden spot where my friend and I were observing them. It was probably time for them to be somewhere, I thought—time to do whatever the smalls did at that hour, for by then it was almost full evening. They moved with rigid, mechanical motions, and we shadowed them easily. We could have caught up to them and grabbed one, pulled it back over into big country—normal country, I mean, the real world where real people live. But I don't think I could have brought myself to do that, as much as my friend and I had talked about it. I looked at him, and he shook his head, so I knew he felt the same. At that point, I'm not sure that either of us knew what we wanted to do. Again, our plans were coming apart.

We kept following the smalls, though. I noticed that even if they weren't moving very fast, they did seem to be moving as fast as they could, as if they were hurrying to get somewhere. Their arms and legs shifted around in the manner of prosthetic limbs, making them look almost crippled, though not crippled so that you felt sorry for them, I should say, but maimed in a way that made you want to keep your distance,

as if they could infect you with some dreadful condition. Eventually, we saw lights ahead. With an artificial radiance, they flooded the darkness on the other side of a hill that the small children were approaching. And when they got to the top of the hill, they paused for a moment, their silhouettes outlined against the sky by the lights shining on them from below. For a moment, it was a rather picturesque tableau. But soon the small children did something with their heads, raising them up with a slow mechanical motion by elongating their necks, like a telescope sliding open a little. Then they swiveled those heads around without moving their bodies—turning them just enough so that it seemed they were looking at me and my friend. Both of us dropped to the ground as if we had been shot. In the darkness, I heard my friend whisper, “Those rotten, horrible smalls. You can never know what they're going to do. I hate them so much.”

“Yeah,” I murmured in soft response.

When we looked up from the ground, the small children were gone, no doubt having moved down the other side of the hill. It couldn't have been a very steep incline there, or so I calculated. Otherwise, the smalls—with their awkward, practically disabled bodies—wouldn't have been able to negotiate the descent. But when my friend and I ran up to the hilltop, moving in a crouched position, we saw that it was almost a straight drop over the edge. And the small children were now walking like broken robots down below us. Their destination looked like a little toy town that was evidently under construction. “See,” my friend said. “My dad knew it. Pretty soon all of this land around here will be small country.”

They were moving around like mad in a kind of pit. Stretching out for about a mile was a half-built town that was almost a double of the town where my friend and I lived. The smalls were hopping around in a frenzy to finish it, as if they were on a tight schedule. “Maybe they have to complete the place before a certain time,” my friend conjectured. “Why else would they be working at night?” *Or maybe that's just the way they are*, I thought. All kinds of small building machinery were positioned along the town's main street, though none of it was in motion. Small people who looked as if they were directing operations stood with their stubby arms outstretched, pointing in all directions or inspecting unrolled building plans held tightly by their tiny digits. Everyone seemed busy with some project—putting up storefronts that had little detail or identifying features, working on skeletal frameworks that maybe were going to be houses, or carrying around what appeared to be prefabricated parts that would ultimately be integrated into the toy town. On several street corners small people were yelling through staticky bull horns. But they didn't seem to be addressing anyone in particular, and what they were shouting wasn't distinguishable as anything but gibberish. As a matter of fact—just pure, natural fact—when I considered the scene before me from its smallest to its most prominent features, the whole enterprise of the small people's town-building seemed to be nothing but an act. They weren't building anything with point and purpose at its core, anything that was more than a spectral illusion—they were putting on a show. Whether or not this was intentional on their part intrigued me for some reason.

Once I had thrown off the strangeness of the spectacle, I could see how rickety, how shoddy everything was. All the buildings were crooked or unevenly sized with respect to the town as a whole. The windows were more trapezoidal than square or rectangular, and the shutters attached to some windows hung loosely, flapping against the walls behind them. A light breeze could have caused the town to collapse and blow away, which may have accounted for the disappearance and emergence of so much small country within real landscapes. I knew that all towns, and even cities, in the big world would eventually go to ruin in time, however sturdy they might appear for however long a period. Thousands of years of towns and cities in the past had proven that. And thousands or millions of years awaited the dissolution of the world as it now stood. But this town was not made to last. It was as if the small people knew there was no point in bothering with permanence. As I said, that explained a lot to me about small country—how it was always moving from one location to another, as my friend's father was aware so that he could move his family away from wherever it rose up after a period of seclusion. But there was also something more. They sought no permanent standing in the world. For them, existence was all chaos, nonsense, and emptiness. I knew the same had been written about our world, the supposedly real world. But that was opinion, speculation. And only very few had claimed as much. Yet the small people as a lot seemed to embrace these objectionable qualities as truths. Now it became more explicable to me that they should be passed over in the archives of human thought. Theirs was not a lone voice speaking out of time. Theirs was a society subsisting, even thriving, on the brink

of nonexistence—an enigma that repulsed wholesome deliberation by real people. And their habitats were all but ruins upon inauguration.

No one in the big world, or very few, mentioned that the fully extinct leavings of towns like this remained after the smalls relocated, because once a place had become small country it was left alone, as if it was not fit to be reclaimed by real humans, as if the earth in these places had been polluted by an alien occupancy, and only pestilence abided there. You know this as well as I do, Doctor. But nobody writes about this fact, and its corollary that one day there will be no room left for a real world to be built—the unreal was moving in. I believe I realized this truth at a deep level within me during the one brave day I spent at a middling library. And now I was shaken by it to my marrow.

Maybe there are grubby pamphlets passed around among people like my friend's father, crumpled pages whose possession would cause someone to be branded as a shameful little bigot, you might say—an outcast. So anything that appears in print or otherwise about the small people is labeled as pernicious ravings and propaganda. There are means for hushing up what people would prefer not to delve into. But I've already gone into that.

Gazing at the new small town going up, such as it was, was to witness the intrusion of an unnatural colony of beings into the anatomy of our world—not a different race or group, but something that did not belong, neither here nor anywhere conceivable by human senses or cognition. It was something unknown that had taken form, or was in the process of taking form, coming of age in a world it was displacing. That night with my friend brought so many things

home to me. A new phase in my sentiment toward the smalls had begun fermenting within my being. “None of it is real,” my friend said. “I don't know what it is.” A creeping sense of something hitherto concealed overcame me, as I'm sure it did him. Fear had now gotten the better of both hatred and curiosity. Beside me, my friend whispered: “Let's get out of here.” In sync, we jumped to our feet. When we turned about, though, I almost lost consciousness. For behind us was a regiment of small people standing in a semi-circle. How long had they been there? To me, that was more frightening than discovering their presence—being watched without knowing it by a group of smalls.

They didn't speak a word—neither to us nor among one another. Nothing shocked me about that, but it did add to the disorienting unreality of the situation. For a time, they stayed in place. Paradoxically, they appeared gigantic, that is, gigantic for toys, given their toy-like aspect. For instance, their clothes seemed to be painted on them, not worn by them. And their faces were so smooth, gleaming in the moonlight without any of the characteristic qualities of flesh. Despite their masculine semblance, their faces were beardless. They were also unwrinkled, unworn by time and somehow immortal. This was how they had always been, created somehow but not developed in stages from birth to their present age. There had been no process of coming of age for them, I thought later—no birth or death or all the things in between that trouble our own existence, or at least troubled us when we attended to them. There was only going through the motions, a pretense of life. In a way, they were a mirror of us—of what we wanted for ourselves. They marked time and nothing else. Time to do this. Time to do

that. Time to make another town. Time to relocate, having poisoned a new landscape with small country.

During the standoff between the smalls and my friend and me, an uncanny stillness prevailed. But then their heads swiveled simultaneously. Each turned toward another. They didn't seem to be exchanging glances, though, or even looking directly into one another's glassy, empty eyes—not as my friend and I looked to each other with the same thought in our minds. We couldn't run around them, because they surrounded us. And we didn't want to jump down the steep incline at our backs and land in the small town. So we began to move slowly through their ranks, not knowing what to expect. While we had come there to harm them, our taste for that was now lost. It seemed to us, as we later talked of it, that we could not understand them at all or what malevolence they might harbor toward us.

Very slowly, then, we sidled our way among them, and they didn't attempt to block our path. However, they did do something, or seemed to do something. This was to lightly press their bodies against ours as we passed. That turned out to be worse than any brute physical encounter we could have had with them—their touch. For they were not stiff and rigid as we expected, not the hard, plastic toys we might have neatly torn apart, bloodlessly dislodging their seemingly prosthetic limbs. Instead, we found that they were soft, very soft. Their shapes felt as if they were giving way as they lightly pressed themselves against us. But they were also swivel-headed dummy-things—freakish unrealities like their town and maybe everything having to do with small country. Did they even exist as our minds conjured existence, both our own and that of all else within our perception?

What were these things that seemed to be all appearance and no substance? Fortunately, such questions did not paralyze us.

Once my friend and I were on the other side of the smalls, we ran without pause to where we commenced our terribly misconceived incursion into small country. The rest of the night we spent shivering with cold and fear in the lavatory hut at the old park on the edge of town. The only time we spoke was in the morning. Just before we parted for our respective homes, my friend looked at me with an abysmal expression on his face and said, “My dad will kill me if he ever finds out what we did.”

“Yeah,” I said, drawing out at length that single, stupid syllable, exhaling it in a dead voice.

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Not long after our misadventure, my friend moved away with his family. And before the end of that school year, those signs went up with the simple faces on them. They first appeared at the edge of town and then proceeded for some miles along the open road beyond. I made a point of going around and finding all the signs I could, noting which direction their arrows pointed to indicate small country. I saw that people still went to the old park. They must have been aware that small country wasn't far away, but that made no difference to them, not as it did to me.

A few weeks before it was time for the new school year to begin, I received a letter from my friend. It was hand delivered to me by my mother, who first took a moment to interrogate me about any packs of cigarettes I might have hidden in the basement, which was where I happened to be at

the time, lying on an old sofa we had down there. After that night in small country, my friend and I tried smoking cigarettes for a while. I think we both wanted to do something we'd never done before, something to make us feel we had changed and were no longer those kids who talked so much about the smalls. I kept the last pack of cigarettes we shared, and my mom found them. I hadn't even smoked since my friend moved away.

I was elated when I got his letter, which was only a single page. But I read that page countless times, savoring its words and even reciting them in my friend's voice. There was nothing more in the letter than my friend's banal depiction of the new place he was living and the school he would be attending. That was enough to relieve the sense of demoralization I felt since he had gone. I wrote back to him, of course, and that initiated an exchange of letters between us, and even some phone calls. I told him that I still had the last pack of cigarettes we shared, even though my mother had taken them. What I never asked him was whether he had made any new friends.

In mid-winter, I opened the latest missive from my friend after a hiatus during which he had answered none of my letters. What I read in it revived a kaleidoscope of memories and emotions, none of them welcome to my still delicate state of mind. The news my friend related was that his father had disappeared about a month before. One day, he didn't return from work, and his family had heard nothing from him since. My friend didn't write a word about any particular suspicions he had, and that I also nurtured. He did say that the police had come to his house. As a rule, his mother wouldn't have allowed them into their home to poke

around. His father had never trusted the police or any other persons of officialdom, and neither did his mother. But in this circumstance, that rule went out the window.

The police didn't find anything that interested them in the house, but when they looked around the garage they turned up a lock box hidden underneath a workshop table. My friend's mother gave them permission to open it, and inside they discovered, as my friend quoted them, “stacks of literature.” Then he wrote, “Both my mom and I were fairly certain that what they called literature wasn't pornography or anything of the kind. It was stuff about *them*.” That was the first reference to the small people I could recollect appearing in our correspondence with each other. Naturally, this was a subject that we didn't want to linger over. My friend continued regarding what was hidden in his dad's lock box that the police pried open: “Some of it was in envelopes with postmarks from all over the world.” The police rummaged through the material until my friend's mother told them there wasn't anything in there that would help them find her husband. “The cops didn't say a word after that,” my friend wrote. “I thought they might. It seemed to me they should have, the way they were looking at each other. But they just piled the envelopes and stuff back in the box and shoved the box back underneath my dad's workshop table. Then they left, and we haven't heard from them since, the bastards.”

For a few days, I didn't know what to write in response to my friend's letter. I considered phoning him, but I didn't think that was a prudent action to take. Finally, I composed a short letter of vague condolences and hopes that his dad had business he thought it best not to share with him and

his mother. My letter was a mass of circumlocutions that I was sure my friend would understand. To my grief, I never received a response to that letter, and it was almost spring before I could admit to myself that I would never hear from him again.

I said that my friend avoided mentioning the smalls in our letters. However, as I later pored over our correspondence I saw that he had written something to me that I blocked from recall. The erasure of his words from my memory was understandable, for what he wrote was simply too strange to reflect upon for very long. If you'll remember, Doctor, I posed the following question: “How could we know we were keeping certain truths from ourselves regarding how things are in this world at its deepest level?” And the answer I gave to my own question was this: “Because we had done it before.” Well, that's exactly what I had done when I read what my friend wrote to me in one of his letters. Here is my recitation of it from memory: “My dad got drunk last night and told me things I had never heard from him before. I didn't understand most of it. What I do remember was his repeating what he called a *spectral link* between the smalls and some people in the real world. Then he went on about people who looked and acted like humans but were not human. Maybe he said they were not *completely* human. He did have a term for them. It was *half-small people*.”

You might be able to comprehend, Doctor, how disquieted I was to see written in my friend's hand certain words that, at least in concept, had occurred to me only in a dream. I hated to think that there was a *spectral link* between myself and the smalls, and though I have spoken of peculiar truths regarding how things really are in this world at its

deepest level, truths that we keep ourselves from knowing, I concluded with stark lucidity that there was absolutely *no* spectral link between myself and the smalls—not as I understood my friend's father to have used these words. If anything, it was exactly the opposite. The small people were drastically alien to me. I was derided by my parents as a shameful little bigot because of my fear of them and my hatred of them, feelings that I had not known to exist in anyone else besides my friend, and vicariously through him his father—and his mother, too, it seemed, who I believe had also gone the way of the rest of my friend's family. But where they had gone I couldn't bring myself to ponder.

While continuing to be afraid of the smalls and to hate them, I now transferred these emotions with a rabid vehemence toward the half-smalls, who my friend added sometimes devolved—or whatever the proper term might be—in both appearance and nature into small people through and through. Following this transformation, which they might not even know was possible or consider desirable—there was nothing for them to do except move into small country and live among their kind, that is, if they didn't regard this prospect as so repellent that they took other measures rather than lose the sense of *who* they were, or thought they were, and *what* they were, or thought they were. With its small people, this world just seemed a preposterous mess to me, and now it was revealed to be even worse than I knew. Why couldn't things be different? What would it take for our lives to make some kind of sense? Maybe that's just not possible, I thought. Maybe any world would be just as preposterous. Yet the existence of the half-smalls nevertheless still inspired in me a crawling fear, a new unseen horror, as I've mentioned

having this sensation in dreams, along with a hatred of them for having what I thought was a *weakness* connecting them in some spectral manner with the small people. At least the latter were something of a phenomenally known quantity to my mind, however little I understood about them. But the halfers were something else—interlopers in a world where they didn't belong, the source of all questions about who or what human beings might be as a life form. For as tiresome as it has become, the question of what it means to be human continues to fervently preoccupy us—because without that definition we cannot positively know if our laborious self-perpetuation is worth the candle we keep lit in the blackness of the universe. We cannot decide whether we should continue or terminate the human race, if there is anything that might be called the human race, since we are as fragmented in the aggregate as we are as individuals—things of parts and not the integrated organisms we represent to ourselves. All the same, as naïve and arrogant as this may sound, I felt that my sensibility enabled my insight into this immemorial affair. I thought of this sensibility as a type of instinct that actually *forced* me to see things as they were and not as I was supposed to see them so that I could get by in life.

From this point on, as I walked the streets of the town where I lived, I could see only how contrary everything was to the picture of it I was psychologically strong-armed into having. Now the place where I grew up was no more than another preposterous mess. The town's motto on the sign as you entered Main Street was: “A Good Place to Live”—not exactly a boastful statement. In actuality, though, it was pretty crummy. Not crummy *in itself*, I should say, because I had never lived in any other towns. They might be as crummy as

my native town. The whole planet might be crummy for all I knew then. When I looked closely at the city hall, for instance, I could see it was wobbly. Maybe at one time I would have thought nothing of walking through the wide front doors of the place. Now that my eyes could see that they tilted quite visibly, I wouldn't have entered its space on a dare. Or take the post office. If my mother had ordered me in her most calmly intimidating voice to go buy her some stamps, I wouldn't do it. Not one foot would I set inside, because its bricks were set together all wrong. One of them could slide a little, I gauged, and the walls might come crashing down in a flash and bury me alive as I was standing in line to buy some rotten stamps which had images on them that were so faded and cock-eyed I couldn't tell anymore what they were supposed to represent. Once they were printed with images of monuments in one place or another where my family went on vacation, as I remembered in my mind's eye, but from then on they appeared all bent up and sagging. And they were all supposed to be *so grand*. Taken in total, the whole world was supposed to be *so grand*. But it wasn't, not from my perspective, which was no longer so muddled I couldn't see things for what they were and not how I was supposed to see them. In my view, all the earth and anything that stood upon it was just like the town where I lived—not a *good* place but a *crummy* place. Even new places that people were always rushing around to build were crummy from the start—wobbly and tilted, bent and sagging. All the energy and hustling that went into building a car wash or a row of stores that seemed to shoot up overnight like mushrooms—it was just so useless. And the most piddling events were elevated as a matter of course bey-

ond their significance, as testified by the ubiquitous Grand Openings wherever you looked. It was all supposed to amount to something, whatever it was. Everything had to be imbued with consequence. But nothing amounted to anything. It was all just trying to be what it wasn't—real, that is, authentic in every sense of the word, and not fatally bogus.

I could see the same thing in people that I did in the flimsy material world, this junkyard of cast-off ectoplasm. They didn't meet expectations either, though, as I said, no one yet has been able to say definitely who or what we are. And I don't think anyone will ever be able to do so. I don't think they want to. What I do think they want is to say that humans, real humans, are this and that and the other thing—that there are millions of qualities humans have that nothing else has, and they say all this to keep us confused, to keep themselves confused, about what humans really are, except that they're not small people. But now I was fixated on the half-smalls. Now my sensibility, my special instinct, had become sufficiently honed to discern who was what. Not that I expected any consolation from such knowledge—it was simply something to do while I decided what to do with myself.

At first, as I walked around town during the summer after I stopped receiving letters from my friend, I wasn't sure exactly how my sensibility was functioning. I would get a feeling, like a tingling inside me, when I saw certain people strolling down the sidewalk or sitting at picnic tables outside the frozen custard stand that did land-office business throughout the summer months. I'm sure you get the picture, Doc. It was show time and nothing but. No doubt some clickety-clack version of it was being enacted by the smalls,

as I was now with some confidence able to imagine after beholding one of their own towns in its construction stage, a poor excuse for even the crummiest human town, if one wants to get into degrees of crumminess, that is.

All things considered, my wits were in relatively fair working order, and my sensibility was becoming more and more sharply attuned. Occasionally, the tingling sensation I felt in the proximity of certain persons caught me off guard and pierced my spine with anxiety, but for the most part I was in control. Within the span of about a week, I not only felt something about those people but also began to see little things about them, things you wouldn't notice without an exacting gaze. After my confrontation with the small people and detecting the smoothness of their faces, which were bereft of the character bestowed by time, unwrinkled and unworn, I saw a family resemblance in the same people who set off that tingling inside me. I wished my friend could have been there, because I was sure he would have seen the same thing about them—that they were halfers.

Some days I'd walk from one end of town to the other, and I'd pick out the real people from the half-small people. As I passed by each person I would check off their identities in my mind—halfer, real, halfer, real, and so on. Mr. So-and-so—halfer. The old woman who walks her dog in the park every day—real. Schoolteachers—halfers every one. Cops, too, all halfers, which made me think of my friend's family and the investigating officers who found the literature under his father's workshop table. The girl who sat next to me in math class—real. I was glad about that. The middle-aged lady in the window at the beauty shop—everyone thought she had a facelift done, but she was a halfer. With children it

was more of a challenge sorting out the real ones from the halfers. Most of them I let pass as real. There was one group of kids, though, all spindly specimens with empty stares. They had to be half-smalls.

All told, I judged about half the people in town as real and half as halfers. I had gotten to be quite proficient at spotting our citizens as one or the other—too good, in the end. I really should have shut off my thoughts sometimes, but I couldn't do that.

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It was Saturday, and my dad was off work for the weekend. My family always barbecued hamburgers and hot dogs on those days and ate them together around a plastic table in the backyard. We don't tend to see our parents the way we do others. We're too close to them. Even if they make you miserable and call you a shameful little bigot, they're still your parents—special circumstances notwithstanding. But after all the time I spent around town separating the real people from the half-smalls, I scrutinized everyone the same. More to the point, I felt that tingling inside me. Being with both my mother and father for an extended period of time on a Saturday afternoon, and sitting with them around a plastic table in the backyard, I was tingling like mad. My father was smiling slightly and staring with concentration as he always did. But I never noticed that he was really staring at nothing in particular—that he was more or less gawking with bottomless eyes. And though the sun was shining on my mother's smooth face, her big eyes weren't squinting. Furthermore, they didn't look right or left, up or down. They were just big eyes like a big doll would have. The

longer I sat with my parents eating hamburgers, hot dogs, and potato salad with no egg whites, because from the first time I ate potato salad with egg whites I refused to eat it again that way, the more I tingled inside. My parents did what they had to do in order to be real parents to me. But we weren't biologically related, as I'm sure it says in your file on me. I was adopted as an infant, and now I knew that I was only a prop, something to aid them in not being found out for what they were.

Before they told me, I already knew somehow that I was adopted. And I was never happy about that. But on that Saturday as I sat eating dinner with my parents around a plastic table, I praised whatever there was to praise that I was adopted, or else I would have been a halfer, too, if in fact that's the way it works. Nevertheless, I was pleased not to be their real offspring. I couldn't be sure, of course, if reals could give birth to halfers or the other way around, since I didn't know how the spectral link between the small people and the real people worked. My friend was taken from me before I could learn more about that, and maybe about other things. I hated that—I hated it with all my being. And what happened, as I mentioned, was that all my hate for the small people transferred to the half-smalls. Now I wondered if the reason for that transference wasn't due to my subliminal recognition of having parents who belonged to that weird species.

Retrospectively, it made all the sense in this clockwork world that my father and mother were halfers—the way they reproached me so often about being a shameful little bigot when in truth I was not a bigot but a real person who was afraid of the small people and couldn't accept the arrange-

ment the big world had with them. Maybe real parents would have understood that, I don't know. I wanted to think so. I wanted to think that there was something sensible, or at least something of marginal value about the tick-tock world I had been born into. But the two halfers sitting with me at that plastic table only berated me as a shameful little bigot, certainly because they wanted to stifle my sensitivity to how things were in the world at its deepest level and to muddle my brain as I came of age, going through all the adjustments in the process so that I could be presented in company—that is, so that I would be a sightless moron like everyone else, everyone except people like the only friend I ever had in my life. In a split-second, as I sat munching my hamburger or hot dog and watching my mother and father that day, I was hopelessly possessed by hatred for them.

That night I lay awake in my bed for a long time, earnestly trying to arrive at some way to live with the household status quo, just as real humans had arranged at some time in the past to live with the small people, though no book I could find would pinpoint when that was or how it was done. But there was no way I could do that—no way at all.

It must have been around the middle of the night—I didn't plan a specific time—when I entered my mother and father's bedroom. They were lying on their backs in bed, the moonlight glowing on my father's slightly smiling face and concentrating stare as well as on my mother's smooth face and big eyes, which were open. Both their eyes were open. I don't know why. Maybe they didn't sleep. It wasn't as if I was the sort of person to peek into his parents' bedroom to see what they were doing.

“Dad, Mom,” I said, just to get their attention. They didn't even sit up in bed, though. Maybe they were sleeping, in their own way. “Listen,” I continued. “I want to tell you something. What I want to tell you is...” Then, with all the lung power I could summon, I screamed: “I'm a shameful little bigot. I hate the small people. I hate them for all I'm worth. But more than I hate the small people, I hate you.”

Then I jumped on the bed and was all over them with the knives I'd gotten from the kitchen. *Push*, *push*, *push*. *Chop*, *chop*, *chop*. They didn't make a sound the whole time. I can tell you one thing—halfers aren't soft like the smalls. I really had to work on those things that called themselves my parents.

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I wasn't exactly amazed that I never saw the inside of a courtroom, knowing as I did what I knew. I didn't know, however, what would ensue in the aftermath of my deed—that I would be locked up in this place. Whatever it is, it isn't a prison, not with the superlative educational facilities you've provided, allowing my mind and sensibility to flourish. If our positions were reversed, that would be my scheme—cultivate me like a plant, breed me into something that could express its view of the world at its deepest level. You were ready for me from the very first, so I have to assume I'm not the only one to do what I did, and for the reason I did it. That's right, isn't it, Doctor? But I've been here so long. How many more doctors must I see who want to hear my story? Are you in training or something? I'm as sane as your shoes, we both know that, even though I should have gone mad long ago from my dreams alone. Why can't we

make a deal, come to an arrangement? I'm practically an old man. My coming of age came and went. I'd kill myself if I thought you'd let me. That's not what you want, though, is it? Could you please give me an answer just once?

Everything is such a mystery with you people—halfers I used to think, but I don't know anymore. I lost my instinct for that the moment I stepped into this place. Did you do that? And what about the tingling? That hasn't happened in who knows how long. It would be nice to see a clock or a calendar every so often. Don't you care about time, whatever you are? How about space, existence, all the commotion of reality? I've known it was all just a preposterous mess for ages now. I also learned that I should be on the outside, and the rest of this ludicrous world, or most of it, should be in here for study and rehabilitation, adjustment and readjustment, if that's the point. What are you trying to accomplish? Whatever it is, you seem to be doing a terrible job of it. Is everything still as crummy as I remember it? Your world, whichever one it may have been, was an offense to my eyes. And it didn't have to be that way. But maybe that's the way you wanted it—a nightmare from morning stool to bedtime stories.

Oh, here they come—the big boys. You can tell them to take their hands off me. Big boys with big hands. But are they really big, or only half big? I believe an autopsy could establish the facts, if you'd allow me the pleasure. My parents were half-smalls. The alignment of their bones was human enough, but their organs seemed all of a piece. It could have been they were starting to convert, I don't know. So what's inside of the small people, Doctor? My guess is that they're composed of some doughy substance inside and out—

a flabby clay that can be molded into any form, having no identity of its own. Is this really our world, the real world, or is it theirs? Did the right hand of evolution know what the left hand was doing? And what about the spectral link? I have my theories. I've had lots of time to think about that, for what it's worth—thinking. Give me a hint, something to mull over. I just need a speck of hope to keep me from going to pieces—a little truth to hang onto. Answer me, Doctor, before I'm dragged off. Who are you? What are you? Answer me. For the love of all that is real—Who am I? What am I?

The Old Shelters (2014 Die Novelle - Zeitschrift für Experimentelles Version)

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They used to be everywhere. Some of them were small and some were massive. If you wanted to take a walk, you could go to one of them. They saved you from just having to wander about pointlessly. You had a destination anytime you needed one. You could stride down streets with a gaze of purpose, not slouch as if you were nobody with nowhere to be and no one who was waiting for you. That was just one of their many gifts to you. Whenever the mood moved you, their doors were open and you were welcome. Even on holidays their lights were on. When every other operation was locked up and dark on some disgusting national holiday or some idiotic day of religious observance, they defied custom and laughed in the face of tradition. They were sanctuaries that were not sacred—sterile and calming. You could have all the privacy you wanted. That was a certainty—their promise to you. Of course there were some hours when they needed to shut you out for a time so they could keep themselves in good order, clean out the stables in a manner of speaking. But you only had to wait a short time before activity was resumed and all was back to normal. That was not too much to sacrifice for the endowments they showered upon anyone regardless of how well-dressed or how ugly their visitors. They

knew why people entered their sheltering spaces. They made no demands or asked you why you came. You were immune from being bothered and could either stroll about or simply stand and stare wherever you liked. It was amazing how accommodating they were. Really, there was nothing like them in the world. In a crucial way they were like hospitals, except one did not have to be in pain or on the brink of death as a ticket for entry. But if you did collapse to the floor from some chronic malady or an acute attack of a disease you did not realise afflicted you, they would call for help. Care for the ill was not their purpose. They moved to act merely because it was the thing to do. Obviously the latter motive was more dependable, since passion is such a fickle thing and may work against your most dire requirements if you are not a member of the groups with certain interests and allegiances. Passion, hope, salvation—these had nothing to do with these asylums. You could leave empty incentives of that sort out in the street with the rest of the fraudulence and uselessness of creation. During the time you spent within the walls of a preferred or chance locale of the kind in question you were liberated from nonsense and lies. What more could one ask of an establishment? Once they were ubiquitous. I have already praised them for the nameless energy that made them so. Yet they had hardly existed for very long before every one of them disappeared. One day they were simply gone. Like everything that seemed would go on forever they perished. And nothing else took over that supplied similar advantages. It was an outrage. It was a defilement of world-historical proportions. But like all defilements this singular scandal was accepted by the stupid mass of those who crowd the earth. It was a matter of survival—

that most scandalous of justifications for the barely tolerable goings-on that occur everywhere and at every minute of day and night. There was no respite and no escape from them. No haven now abides for me and other like me from the sickness of existence. Not a single memorial or burying ground has been allowed that might be frequented in place of the old shelters. What good is anything without them? I miss them so much.

Poetry

This Degenerate Little Town (2001)
Death Poems (2004)
Envoi (2007)
I Have A Special Plan For This World (2000)
(Transcribed from the 2000 Current 93 release of the album ‘I Have A Special Plan For This World’)
The Unholy City (2003)
Things They Will Never Tell You (2006)

This Degenerate Little Town (2007 Teatro Grottesco Version)

First published as *This Degenerate Little Town*, Fall 2001
Also published in: *Teatro Grottesco*.

The greatest secret,
which appears in no religious doctrine
and is found nowhere
in the world's overburdened library
of myths and fables
nor receives the slightest mention
in any philosopher's system
or scientist's speculation...
The greatest secret,
perhaps the only secret,
is that the universe,
all of creation,
owes its existence
to a degenerate little town.
And if it were possible
to strip away the scenery that surrounds us,
to pull up the landscape
of every planet,
to rip away the skies
and shove aside the stars and suns,
to tear from ourselves our own flesh

and delve deep into our bones,
we would find it standing there eternal,
the origin of all things visible
or invisible,
the source of everything that is
or can be,
this degenerate little town.
And then we would discover
its twisted streets
and tilting houses,
its decaying ground
and rotting sky.
And with our own eyes
we would see the diseased faces
peeking from grimy windows.
Then we would realize
why it is such a secret.
The greatest and most vile secret.
This degenerate little town
where everything began
and from whose core of corruption
everything seeps out...
    From the beginning,
if there was a beginning,
this degenerate little town
has become ever more degenerate;
its streets more twisted
its houses more tilting
its ground more decayed
its sky more rotten,
those faces behind ever more grimy windows

have become ever more diseased
And in the end...
But there can never be an end
for this degenerate little town.
No more than an end will ever come
for the worlds that have seeped out of it
for everything we can know
is degenerate from the beginning,
everything becomes more twisted and tilting,
more diseased and decayed
rotting from the very sky.
This is the law of things,
if there can be any law
in a universe that has its source and origin
in a degenerate little town,
which has been degenerate from the beginning,
if there was a beginning,
and will go on with its degeneration,
its ceaseless twisting and tilting,
its disease and decay,
its infinite shades of rottenness
forever and without end.
    We cannot help but wonder,
in our most perverse moments,
what it would be like
to inhabit this degenerate little town
where the sky is forever dripping its rottenness like rain
to be among those faces
that are diseased faces
eternally diseased faces
eternally peeking through the glass of grimy windows

and out into twisted streets
lined with tilting houses
in a town that is forever degenerating
and will be degenerating forever.
We cannot help but wonder
in our most perverse moments
as we look through bleary eyes
and see the stars that seem to form
so many twisting roads through the blackness,
or feel our flesh rotting upon our bones,
and yet we can only wonder
we can only whisper
or cry out in our dreams
“O Where is the way to this degenerate little town?”
    There are those among us
who claim to have seen
this degenerate little town,
although they may be unaware
of its true nature.
There are those who have emerged
from some painful ordeal of the body
or of the mind,
and then begun speaking
of how they saw in the distance
an outline of crooked houses
tilting this way and that,
or walked along some twisted street,
and felt the ground soft with decay
beneath their steps,
or even glimpsed those diseased faces,
their skin rough and pale as plaster,

peeking from behind grimy windows.
But those who claim to have seen such things
always seem to tell a somewhat different story -
failing to compose a consistent picture
of what they may have seen,
or imagine they have seen.
And so we stare at them suspiciously
for a moment,
and then start to walk away,
leaving them to their lies or their illusions,
which of course are the very essence
of this degenerate little town.
"Where is this place?
This degenerate little town?
What is its name?
And who were its creators?"

Such questions are inevitable
and a matter of course
whenever a world knowledge
is attained about anything.
Never mind the greatest secret.
The greatest mystery.

"Are there seasons in the land of this town?
Is there a springtime in which great rains pour down day
and night from that rotting sky?
Are there sultry summers that lay a heavy stillness upon
those twisted streets?
And what of its autumn, which must be so succulent with all
the colours of decay?

Do the winters there, in this degenerate little town, pile
their weighty snow upon the roofs of those tilting houses?”

So many question about this secret place.
But as long as such questions are asked,
and countless answers are offered,
the greatest secret will always remain protected,
for no questions will ever be asked,
no answers will ever be allowed
concerning those diseased faces
that have gazed forever
behind the glass of grimy windows.
    Like every phenomenon
that we cannot fully face,
this degenerate little town
must remain a cult in its essence
and serve as a limit
for such as we care to know
about what is beyond
the blackness of night
or what is deep in our bones,
for like every phenomenon
that we have actually come to face
this degenerate little town
can only pain us,
adding to our lives
a mere surplus of the pains
we have known so well
throughout the agonised ages
of a degenerate creation.

But like no other phenomenon
that we have ever faced,
this degenerate little town,
under its rotting sky,
standing upon decayed ground—
a landscape of a pain
that is like no other—
may be our last hope,
the only hope we have
of killing all the hopes
we have ever had
and murdering every mystery
we have ever cherished,
so that we may step forth, finally,
into that great shining kingdom
of which we have always dreamed.
    It may be quite likely
that we are grotesquely mistaken
to think there is anything special,
anything remarkable at all,
about this degenerate little town.
Far from being the greatest secret,
the worst or the finest of all our dreams,
it may be quite likely
the greatest commonplace,
the supreme banality.
Consider the possibility.
Who among us
have not found ourselves
beneath a rotting sky?
A sky broken and rotting

from what has been heaped up to it
during every epic of this earth,
this ground that is miles deep
with the decay of everything
that has ever lived upon it.
Who has not traveled
through twisted streets,
and under the shadow of houses,
even the straightest of which,
if our eyes could only see it,
is veering towards to tilt?
As for diseased faces,
they are ever prevailing
to the point of embarrassment.
And so much for this civic marvel
that is beyond the blackness of night,
or resides deep in our bones.
Yet if this is the case,
as it quite likely may be,
what remains for us in a universe
where there is nothing special,
nothing of any account,
let alone the saving miracle
of this degenerate little town?
    It seems entirely natural that,
should anyone gain full knowledge
of this degenerate little town,
they would deny the truth
of this greatest, most terrible of secrets -
and, as a consequence,
as an act of self-protection,

would fabricate some other
set of circumstances,
a more companionable picture
of the way of things.
This would explain so many
of the deranged idols and beliefs
that have arisen in our world.
At least we would be able to account
for the multitudes of Mannequin Saviours,
as one might view them -
their faces smooth and serene
behind display windows,
welcoming the faithful who,
upon their death,
will enter a department-store paradise
of the most vague and intangible delights.
And some mention must be made
of what might be called
the Sect of the Puppetlands,
whose highly deranged adherents
posit a transcendent universe
of infinite and harmless antics
that are imperfectly mirrored
in the chaos and crises of our own world,
which, in any case, will end nicely
when the Great Puppet Play is concluded
in a sweet bedtime of slumber...
until the next show begins.

Yet, who would begrudge anyone
the denials or alternate renderings

of the twisted streets and tilting houses
the diseased faces and grimy windows of
this degenerate little town,
which itself seems so perfectly bleak,
so in tune with the world we know
forever inclined to ever greater degeneracy
that even the few enlightened ones among us
sometimes doubt it to be real.
    We sometimes imagine
that we have heard voices.
Strange and harsh voices,
faintly calling from beyond
the blackness of night
or from deep in our bones.
And even if there are no actual words,
no actual language we know
in which the voices speak,
still there is a terrible understanding
delivered into our world
that only a few may comprehend,
and none would desire,
for this understanding,
this message of strange harsh voices
from beyond the blackness of night,
or from deep in our bones,
declares that this degenerate little town,
that greatest of secrets,
is only a façade
or a mirage,
a picturesque lie
or illusion

in the guise of twisted streets and tilting houses,
all the rottenness and disease which we sense
as the source of all the things we know
or can ever know
when in fact there is something else altogether,
something which none could comprehend,
or desire to comprehend,
yet which they cannot fail to hear
when it slips through the sounds
of those strange and harsh voices,
when it drifts through
during the briefest moments of silence
and from beyond the blackness of night,
or from deep in our bones
comes forth as the hollow resonance
of a most dismal laughter.
    Even though there is no evidence
that a degenerate little town
forms the greatest secret
and is the source
of all the things we know
its truth and its existence remain assured
and there do seem to be certain indications
certain aspects and elements of our lives
that in no uncertain terms
inform us of one fact:
sooner or later we will find ourselves
in this degenerate little town
whether we wish to go there or not.
Because when the sky
begins to darken,

as if rotting before our eyes,
and when our bones
begin to change,
growing soft with decay,
we know that all the ways
of our lives
have been leading us,
and can only lead us,
to this degenerate little town.
And then we may understand
that everything around us,
everything within us,
has a direct point of contact
to that secret place,
that source of all things.
Dreams, for instance,
the dreams of our sleep
wherein every mind is destined
to go twisted and tilting
into lands of swift magic.
These dreams alone would make the case -
if anything were ever needed
in the way of evidence.
These dreams alone
would put us in close view
of those grimy windows
behind which diseased faces
peek out through the glass,
as if they are waiting for
someone to arrive -
as if they are waiting

for everyone, sooner or later,
to enter their little town.

Death Poems
(2013 Death Poems Version)

First published as *Death Poems*, 2004, in a limited edition hardcover issue of 333 un-numbered copies. This is the 2013 version; most poems are identical, but a small number of poems contain slight changes. 'Hospital', in particular, has a different end stanza. Most importantly, however, the book contains new material, 'Closing Statements', following directly on from the poem *Night Voices*.

Here You Go

Death is frightening,
and dying just as bad.
Say what you will,
we don't take it well.

Then how can we live,
with all that ahead?
Something must be
fooling us constantly.

Our brains are tricked
so that we don't believe,
for whatever reason,
we won't go on and on.

Our thoughts are clouded
so that we can't conceive
the exact process
that's waiting for us.

Or perhaps we think that
when the moment comes
someone else will arrive
to take over—we'll survive.

Where logic is concerned,
we're all thumbs.
How couldn't we know
we were born to go?

Growing Up

They said it was all good,
the way that things were.
But you were very young
and said they were lying.

They said it was for the best,
the suffering was all over.
You were older now and
the best seemed not very good.

They said there was nothing
more they could do for you.
“Good,” you said, old enough
to know the way things were.

Usefulness

You can use death to
achieve goals in life.
For example, you can
kill people for hire.

On the other hand,
you can try to save
people for hire...
and get paid whether
or not they die on you.

On a larger scale, there's
the funeral industry,
equipment for making war,
pharmaceutical products
for keeping us alive,
safety measures that leave
you injured but not dead.
All of these are vital
goods and services and
therefore quite lucrative.
All of them are based
on death or the threat
of death—death's reality.

The food you need
so that you don't starve.
The very air you breathe
and the water you drink,
which need to be held
to standards of deadliness.
It costs plenty to keep
us from killing ourselves
and in the process
millions of people gain
a very comfortable living.

Despite its drawbacks,
death can come in handy.
Sometimes it may even seem
all the world lives on death.

Memories

Countless memories
are stored in your brain.
Sometimes they rise up
again and again.
Sometimes they just stay
deep in the fleshy darkness.

Eventually you yourself
become only a memory
that either rises up
again and again
or remains deep
in the brain of another.

Only after everyone
who ever remembered you
is gone for good and all
does the terrible insanity
that once bore your name
achieve a true oblivion.

Good-bye.

Weather Conditions

On some days it's so hot.
On other days it's so cold.

Hot, hot, hot.
Cold, cold, cold.

Finally the word goes out
for you to settle down
in your narrow bed
where you will be comfortable
forever.

Going Ahead

After you're gone,
you instantly begin
to fall behind those
who survive you.

As the days pass,
new things happen
to those survivors
and also in the world.

After you're gone,
you can't keep up
with the latest events:
you're out of touch.

So you fall behind
farther and farther,
left in the dust while
others charge ahead.

Losing Customers

They asked for you on the phone,
but you didn't take the call.
They sent you a nice letter,
but you didn't reply.

So your name was dropped
from one list after another.

No one wants to bother with somebody
who can't be troubled about
a very special one-time offer
(with a money-back guarantee).

No one has the time to go looking
for you over every inch of the earth.

Safety In Numbers

There are plenty more people
than there were at one time.
And plenty more are coming.

It's as if something inside them
is always screaming in an urgent
voice: more, more, more, more.

Or maybe it's like waiting in line.
Everyone feels better if they see
more are behind them than in front.

“That makes sense,” you think
as you make your way forward

and soon find that you're next.

Means To An End

Only one way
to arrive
(that swollen body)
yet so many ways
to leave.

You could spend
your whole life
counting those ways,
thinking about them.

But you can never
know the way
you will take
until it takes you.

It's very strange,
that's for sure.

Smaller

One by one,
over the years,
they went their way.

Each of them
departed without
much shout or show.

As the group
became smaller,
you hardly noticed:

Until the day
you asked, “Hey,
where did they all go?”

Big Problem

Sometimes,
when the all the noise
dies down
and you're by yourself,
it's pleasant to think
that no one is left
in the entire world,
that you are the last.

Everything is over,
and history is like
a movie whose last reel
has already spun its way
through the movie projector,
with no more
attractions to come,
just a blank screen
in an empty theater,
just a clear blue sky
over a quiet landscape.

Nothing that ever happened
makes any difference,
there is nothing more
for you to fret about...
until you realize
that eventually you'll
have to join the others,
that even though
the world is gone,
the biggest problem
in the world
still remains for you.

The Note

Everyone says that
the universe is a marvel.
But you never thought that.

Everyone says that
life is well worth having.
But you never thought that.

What you thought
was contained in a note
pinned to your hanged body.

Everyone thought that
your hand was beautiful.
But they never said anything.

Suddenly

Where did you go?
They looked for you.
They looked everywhere.

But even if they had
looked for you
over every inch of the earth
they would never
have tracked you down.

Yet only yesterday
anyone could have
found you at home
or called you on the telephone.

Premature

When it's all over,
they sometimes say things
such as “before his time”
or perhaps “too young.”

But the fact is this:
everything happens because
“its time has come.”
And the last thing
that happens to you
will always be “on time.”

No one is too young.
Nothing is premature.
Everyone, including you,
is right on schedule.

It's true.

Staying

Staying around here
can be so very hard.
Really very hard.

Getting up every day
and tying your shoes
and eating your food.

You go to bed at night
and sleep your sleep
and dream your dreams.

Then another day comes
and another night goes.
It never seems to stop.

Yet going can be hard too,
really very hard.
Limited options indeed.

Birthday

Even after a person
is gone from this world,
people often tend
to remember birthdays.

They say: today is
the birthday of someone

who would have been
so many years old.

So just in case you're
not around next year:
happy birthday.

Hospital

People go in
who then come out.
People go in
who never come out.

In, out, in, out.
It makes you wonder,
“Will this be the
last place for me?”

Well, probably.

Still

Whoever you are
or think you are,
whatever you've done
or imagine you've done...

A tubercular poet,
a syphilitic musician,
a mad philosopher,
and many others...

Whose voices were
always only echoes,
echoes that are
still reaching you...

Who are still thinking
and still imagining
who you are
and what you've done.

Closing Time

It doesn't matter
if you were a hundred
or sixty-three
or seven and a half.

However old you
might have been,
whatever mark you made
will be erased.

Things don't last.
When you're gone
you are gone
and that is that.

It might seem
that something stays,
that some part of you
still casts a shadow.

It might seem a lot
of lunatic things,
anything except
the actual case...

The world closing up
that tiny space
where you used to be.
It closes so fast.

Calculation

The number of people
who have been born
is the same number
of people who have died
(or will someday die).

The equation is perfect
and must remain so.
Because if the balance
of the born to the dead
should ever be off...

If even a single person
who has been born
shirks the common destiny,
how could you stand to live
with such monstrous figures?

Memento

You meant to take care
and put your affairs in order.
But the unexpected occurred
and there wasn't time.

Later, the loved ones came
and gave away some things,
while putting aside some others:
keepsakes or valuables.

They cried over an old comb
that still had some hairs
twirling through its teeth.
Yet they laughed a little too.

Then someone uncovered
what you left in the attic.
“Oh, dear,” they said softly
and went home to forget you.

De Facto

In order to get things done,
it's essential to have pain:
without it, nothing could be.

But we're so easily fooled:
no one praises hunger,
yet everyone likes to eat.

Little pains and big pains:
they keep you living,
however much it may hurt.

And when it comes to dying,
you want your epitaph to read:
“He never knew what hit him.”

You Dream You Die

You wake up so frightened
because in the dream you
knew it was all over, the end.

Even if you aren't bothered
by this idea when you're awake,
it's still there in your mind.

And so you dream it's all over,
no more, the end of you forever.
You wake up so frightened.

When it finally does happen,
it probably won't be like a dream.
At least you sincerely hope not.

The thought of oneself dying
and never waking up again
can drive a person to suicide.

Complexity

Whatever events may lead
to that last moment,
the finale is always the same:
simple heart failure.

And all the time you thought
that life was so complex.
It's just the beat of a drum:
Thump-thump.

The Conclusion

It was always your
sincere intention
to understand it all
before it all ended.

But your intention
was thwarted:
so many things
took your time away.

You can only wonder
what a few years
of focused reflection
might have gotten you.

Maybe they would have
helped ease the panic
before it all ended.
And maybe they wouldn't.

The Taste

They said it would be over.
You were sure the end was near.
The dread of being so sure.

Yet they turned out to be wrong.
It wasn't going to be over,
not with that kind of certainty.

But you had tasted how it felt
to be so sure that it was all over.
Now the dread of uncertainty.

If only you hadn't listened to them.
If only you had no ears to hear,
and no mouth with which to taste.

Impossibility

You descend
the staircase
in the darkness
alone
and pause
before taking
the last step.

Behind you
in a room
upstairs
your own
voice cries out,
an impossible
sound.

Lights turn on
and people
rush about

the house
without seeing
you there
on the last step.

Your Evacuation

The excrement
of life.
The purgative
of death.

Why not
relief?
Why only
pain?

Pity.

Knowing

Before you existed,
before anything existed,
nobody knows what existed.

This was a long time ago.

Then something happened
that started other things happening
and later on you happened.

This was not so long ago.

Someday it all may all stop
or it may never ever stop.
Start, stop, start, stop.

Nobody knows how long.

Counting The Ways

Millions of years,
billions of bodies.

Some are where
they last fell.

Some are where
they were put.

Some are buried,
some were burned.

Some are scattered
in little pieces.

Billions of bodies,
and then yours...

Fallen, burned, buried,
or in little pieces.

Odyssey

All sorts of paths
can lead to
all sorts of places.

Yet every place
ends up
as the same place.

This is the place
where the
paths are feeding you.

It's not the path
but the place it goes,
if you didn't know.

Request

You lay in the bed,
an arm full of tubes,
a mind full of drugs,
but still thinking.

You see the figure
enter the quiet room
and you lift your arm
and focus your mind.

You ask the doctor,
if it can be arranged,
that your last day
not be your worst day.

Thoughtful

When you're on your last legs,
whether you're confined to a bed

or screaming in a crashed-up car,
many things may occur to you.

Something that won't occur to you,
either confined to a bed or screaming,
is that it doesn't matter what you
did or didn't do during your existence.

You won't think, “That's done with,
so why get excited at this late stage?”
Perhaps there are a few who may think
this way, but they are rare exceptions.

If only we could all think in this manner,
it might make up for what went before:
canceling out the chaos of our lives
and steadying us upon our last legs.

Carpe Diem?

Perhaps once in a while,
or possibly quite often,
it may strike you that
you are not yet dying,
not in any serious sense:
you can “seize the day,”
as has often been advised.

No reason not to follow
this bit of poetic wisdom
and to think of being alive
much as you might regard
some time off from work

or a vacation from school:
a carefree period of play.

This may be a simple view,
but what else can you do
as you wait for the approach
of that awful Sunday night
before returning to the job
or the last day of summer.

Not Today

Perhaps once in a while,
or possibly quite often,
it may strike you that
you are not yet dying,
not in any serious sense:
you can relax a moment
and not feel those jitters.

This is very interesting
because it shows that
you think of being alive
much as you might regard
some time off from work
or a vacation from school:
a carefree period of play.

So your view seems to be
that death is not so bad:
the thing you really dread
is that awful Sunday night

before returning to the job
or the last day of summer
before the school bell rings.

Absolved Of Debt

Possibly you're the kind
of person who's doesn't
save up for a rainy day
or worry about a bill left
unpaid for a month or two,
or even one long past due.

It's not that you're dumb
or lazy, anything like that,
but you believe in things
known by heart not head,
and these are what make
tomorrow easier to take.

This is how it is for you:
all the years of your life,
you've been assured
that nothing will happen,
when you're on the brink,
to prompt you to think.

Unthinkable

The thought unthinkable:
things will still be there
after you're not here.

All of the trees, the traffic:
Those scenes from a play
for which you didn't stay.

It makes much more sense
that when you are gone
the show won't go on.

Still, you leave things behind
pretty much as you found
them, but never mind—
you won't be around.

Night Voices

Why should you have to live?

We don't.

Why should you have to suffer?

We don't.

Why shouldn't you have to die?

We did.

Irrational Blame

It's not that you didn't value your life.
It's that you didn't sufficiently cherish
their company to stay around and serenely wait
until you were taken by an agent of horror
or some idiotic, torturous misadventure.

Hence the source of the devastation they feel:
the imagined slight of self-removal from their midst.
Your too meager regard is what hurts them most.
Why can't they accept there are reasons why
suicide is quite simply another way to die?

Birthright

It just isn't right,
you might say,
to be conceived
like a science project.

Chances are, though,
you're more likely to say
that even what's wrong
is really all right.

But right or wrong,
say what you will,
it's all the same
if you say it or not.

Nostalgia

Certain memories are such that
they torture you with the discord
between nostalgic agitations
and what is truly real.

As an instance, take
a sad song from former days.
It may move you so much

you could explode into the cosmos,
because those days are gone
and you are proceeding
to an end, always proceeding.

Sometimes a sad old song
can even make you break down
and cry your eyes out.
And for what?
Nothing truly real,
on that you can be sure.
Your tears are dedicated
to no more than some
fleeting nonsense that
has you in its awful grasp,
because you are proceeding
to an end, always to a
reliable, perhaps gruesome, end.

Oh, what certain memories
can do to the nostalgic spirit.
They can really drive you crazy,
not to mention they may
even make you break down
and cry your eyes out for some
wretched, fleeting nonsense that
always has you by the throat,
choking you with its awful grasp.

The Shape You Are In

For the sum total of truth
you must go to the body.
Forget everything else.
The body can tell you
all there is to know—
if that's what you want.

The intestinal system
is especially brilliant.
As a philosophical disputant
it is infallible, a real genius.
One wave of cramps
and you bend to its logic.

Ultimately, though, the body
cares nothing for your welfare.
After confiding its wisdom
it takes off for parts unknown,
leaving you a forsaken wreck
by the side of the road.

But that is the way of the body.
You are bound to surrender
to its most eccentric turns.
In the end, your pleas are in vain:
whatever the body says goes.
And as it goes, so do you.

Falling, Asleep

Do you remember the dream where
you lost the ground beneath your feet?

The earth opened up and down you went,
grasping at something to stop your fall.
It was all so vivid, so precise, so real.
How could you forget something like that?

Do you remember the dream where
all the wind went out of the world.
You watched for it to start up again,
but for lack of a breath of air the clouds
choked on nothingness, as did you.
How could such a thing slip your mind?

And what of the dream where you drowned,
arms flailing uselessly in endless waters?
Or the one of a fire that consumed the sun?
You lost that dream, too, didn't you? For even
though each was so vivid, so precise, so real,
they were only visions come and gone.

How can you think when you're passing away
as you lay in your bed, minding your business?
Even the voices that call in the distance are
so dim, so vague, and so unreal they fade.
You have no hope of reviving your dreams
once you fall asleep and never again wake.

Unassisted Suicide

It's hard to leave this world
by your own hand and in secret.
One needs to be highly motivated,

desperate for a change of pace
from a life that has gone to seed.

Of course, most sit back and wait
for an end by natural causes, which
really means a tussle with disease
or suffering with an injury that left you
beyond all hope of repair and in pain.

So often it's simply not a good idea
to stay for the whole performance.
You need to get up and go before
the worst descends, as you know it will,
even if others press you to remain seated.

The most crucial matter in this world
is to offer those who wish an exit
a place to turn, a helping hand.
You were not born by yourself.
Why must you vanish that way?

The Instigators

You entered this world
because of two people
who wanted you here.
Or perhaps they didn't.
Either way, you arrived
as though by some intent.

Then along you went,
going here and there,
doing this and that,

wanting what you wanted
without ever knowing
why you wanted it.

Happy or sad you were.
Good or bad you were.
Either way, they got
what they wanted.
They always do,
because of two people,
and perhaps because of you.

Scratching The Surface

The honest truth is this:
nobody wants to suffer.
Nobody, nobody, nobody.
But what choice is there?
A conspicuous case in point
is the imperative of teeth.
First you suffer to get them,
crying day and night.
And after you get them
they just fall out, making room
for more teeth to grow,
teeth that will need care,
years of fastidious care,
as if you needed that—
a life of dental fixation.
For among your other cares,
you are bound all your days
to service your teeth (and gums)

or face the consequences
should you forsake your duty:
the penance of the drill
and the insertion of metals,
to mention but a few of the
the passions you must endure
to keep your teeth in your head.
Nobody wants to suffer this.
Nobody, nobody, nobody.
So much time and cost, so much
sacrificed for those choppers—
so much enforced suffering,
as if there were any other kind.
Yet in the end nobody will know
the price you paid for your teeth.
Nobody will see them as you lie
tight-lipped in your casket.
Nobody will know what you suffered
for the sake of your teeth, even as
they still suffer for the sake of theirs.
Nobody, nobody, nobody.

Writing Home

Dear Mom and Dad,
I always wanted to ask:
when you went through the motions
that brought me to this dubious world,
did you ever pause to think
that I might rather you didn't?
Were you so possessed

you could not pause to consider
the full repercussions of making it?
Of course, it behooves me
to extend the benefit of the doubt,
to attribute to you some vague notion
that you acted in my interest, saving
me from my peregrinations in nonexistence,
a stranger to being, bumbling in darkness
for the light of life on this earth.
Such is a common rationalization,
and so I must allow its hold upon you.
Yet I must also posit that all you wanted
was to be in with the crowd, the ancient mob
that cheered you on with mad eyes, flared nostrils,
and spittle-dripping chins—those ones
whose approval you secretly sought.
All of these are plausible explanations
for what you did in a chamber cut off
from cool reflection in favor of the primal rite.
Whatever your reasons, the fact remains
of my emergence from that dilated aperture.
Whatever your excuses, I must confess
I've always lamented the day you met.
All that aside, I just wanted to take some time,
having reached the moment in which
I'll make an end to what you began,
to say that I forgive you.

Death Poems
(2004 Death Poems Version)

First published as *Death Poems*, 2004, in a limited edition hardcover issue of 333 un-numbered copies.

Here You Go

Death is frightening,
and dying just as bad.
Say what you will,
we don't take it well.

Then how can we live,
with all that ahead?
Something must be
fooling us constantly.

Our brains are tricked
so that we don't believe,
for whatever reason,
we won't go on and on.

Our thoughts are clouded
so that we can't conceive
the exact process
that's waiting for us.

Or perhaps we think that
when the moment comes

someone else will arrive
to take over-we'll survive.

Where logic is concerned,
we're all thumbs.
How couldn't we know
we were born to go?

Growing Up

They said it was all good,
the way that things were.
But you were very young,
and said they were lying.

They said it was for the best,
the suffering was all over.
You were older now and
the best seemed not very good.

They said there was nothing
more they could do for you.
“Good,” you said, old enough
to know the way things were

Usefulness

You can use death to
achieve goals in life.
For example, you can
kill people for hire.
On the other hand,
you can try to save

people for hire...
and get paid whether
or not they die on you.

On a larger scale, there's
the funeral industry,
equipment for making war,
pharmaceutical products
for keeping us alive,
safety measures that leave
you injured but not dead.
All of these are vital
goods and services and
therefore quite lucrative.
All of them are based
on death or the threat
of death-death's reality.

The food you need
so that you don't starve.
The very air you breathe
and the water you drink,
which need to be held
to standards of deadliness.
It costs plenty to keep
us from killing ourselves
and in the process
millions of people gain
a very comfortable living.

Despite its drawbacks,
death can come in handy.

Sometimes it may even seem
all the world lives on death.

Memories

Countless memories
are stored in your brain.
Sometimes they rise up
again and again.
Sometimes they just stay
deep in the fleshy darkness.

Eventually you yourself
become only a memory
that either rises up
again and again
or remains deep
in the brain of another.

Only after everyone
who ever remembered you
is gone for good and all
does the terrible insanity
that once bore your name
achieve a true oblivion.

Good-bye.

Weather Conditions

On some days it's so hot.
On other days it's so cold.

Hot, hot, hot.
Cold, cold, cold.

Finally the word goes out
for you to settle down
in your narrow bed
where you will be comfortable
forever.

Going Ahead

After you're gone,
you instantly begin
to fall behind those
who survived you.

As the days pass,
new things happen
to those survivors
and also in the world.

After you're gone,
you can't keep up
with the latest events:
you're out of touch.

So you fall behind
farther and farther,
left in the dust while
others charge ahead.

Losing Customers

They asked for you on the phone,
but you didn't take the call.
They sent you a nice letter,
but you didn't reply.

So your name was dropped
from one list after another.

No one wants to bother with somebody
who can't be troubled about
a very special one-time offer
(with a money-back guarantee).

No one has the time to go looking
For you over every inch of the earth.

Safety An Numbers

There are plenty more people
than there were at one time.
And plenty more are coming.

It's as if something inside them
is always screaming in an urgent
voice: more, more, more, more.

Or maybe it's like waiting in line.
Everyone feels better if they see
more are behind them than in front.

“That makes sense,” you think
as you make your way forward
and soon find that you're next.

Means To An End

Only one way
to arrive
(that swollen body)
yet so many ways
to leave.

You could spend
your whole life
counting those ways,
thinking about them.

But you can never
know the way
you will take
until it takes you.

It's very strange
That's for sure.

Smaller

One by one,
over the years,
they went their way.

Each of them
departed without
much shout or show.

As the group
became smaller,

you hardly noticed:

Until the day
you asked, “Hey,
where did they all go?”

Big Problem

Sometimes,
when all the noise
dies down
and you're by yourself,
it's pleasant to think
that no one is left
in the entire world,
that you are the last.

Everything is over,
and history is like
a movie whose last reel
has already spun its way
through the projector,
with no more
attractions to come,
just a blank screen
in an empty theater,
just a clear blue sky
over a quiet landscape.

Nothing that ever happened
makes any difference,
there is nothing more

for you to fret about...
until you realize
that eventually you'll
have to join the others,
that even though
the world is gone,
the biggest problem
in the world
still remains for you.

The Note

Everyone says that
the universe is a marvel.
But you never thought that.

Everyone says that
life is well worth having.
But you never thought that.

What you thought
was contained in a note
pinned to your hanged body.

Everyone thought that
Your hand was beautiful.
But they never said anything.

Suddenly

Where did you go?
They looked for you.
They looked everywhere.

But even if they had
looked for you
over every inch of the earth
they would never
have tracked you down.

Yet only yesterday
anyone could have
found you at home
or called you on the telephone.

Premature

When it's all over,
they sometimes say things
such as “before his time”
or perhaps “too young.”

But the fact is this:
everything happens because
“its time has come.”
And the last thing
that happens to you
will always be “on time.”

No one is too young.
Nothing is premature.
Everyone, including you,
is right on schedule.

It's true.

Staying

Staying around here
can be so very hard.
Really very hard.

Getting up every day
and tying your shoes
and eating your food.

You go to bed at night
and sleep your sleep
and dream your dreams.

Then another day comes
and another night goes.
It never seems to stop.

Yet going can be hard too,
really very hard.
Limited options indeed.

Birthday

Even after a person
is gone from this world,
people often tend
to remember birthdays.

They say: today is
the birthday of someone
who would have been
so many years old.

So just in case you're
not around next year:
happy birthday.

Hospital

People go in
who then come out.
People go in
who never come out.

In, out, in, out.
It makes you wonder,
“Will this place be
the last for me?”

But you don't really
want the answer
to the question about
those ins and outs.

Still

Whoever you are
or think you are,
whatever you've done
or imagine you've done...

A tubercular poet
a syphilitic musician,
a mad philosopher,
and many others...

Whose voices were
always only echoes,
echoes that are
still reaching you...

Who are still thinking
and still imagining
who you are
and what you've done.

Closing Time

It doesn't matter
if you were a hundred
or sixty-three
or seven and a half.

However old you
might have been,
whatever mark you made
will be erased.

Things don't last.
When you're gone
you are gone
and that is that.

It might seem
that something stays,
that some part of you
still casts a shadow.

It might seem a lot
of lunatic things,
anything except
the actual case...

The world closing up
that tiny space
where you used to be.
It closes so fast.

Calculation

The number of people
who have been born
is the same number
of people who have died
(or will someday die).

The equation is perfect
and must remain so.
Because if the balance
of the born to the dead
should ever be off...

If even a single person
who has been born
shirks the common destiny,
how could you stand to live
with such monstrous figures?

Memento

You meant to take care
and put your affairs in order.
But the unexpected occured
and there wasn't time.

Later, the loved ones came
and gave away some things,
while putting aside some others:
keepsakes or valuables.

They cried over an old comb
that still had some hairs
twirling through its teeth.
Yet they laughed a little too.

Then someone uncovered
what you left in the attic.
“Oh, dear,” they said softly
and went home to forget you.

De Facto

In order to get things done,
it's essential to have pain:
without it, nothing could be.

But we're so easily fooled:
no one praises hunger,
yet everyone likes to eat.

Little pains and big pains:
they keep you living,
however much it may hurt.

But when it comes to dying,
you want your epitaph to read:
“He never knew what hit him.”

You Dream You Die

You wake up so frightened
because in the dream you
knew it was all over, the end.

Even if you aren't bothered
by this idea when you're awake,
it's still there in your mind.

And so you dream it's all over,
no more, the end of you forever.
You wake up so frightened.

When it finally does happen,
it probably won't be like a dream.
At least you sincerely hope not.

The thought of oneself dying
and never waking up again
can drive a person to suicide.

Complexity

Whatever events may lead
to that last moment,
the finale is always the same:
Simple heart failure.

And all the time you thought
that life was so complex.
It's just the beat of a drum:
Thump-thump.

The Conclusion

It was always your
sincere intention
to understand it all
before it all ended.

But your intention
was thwarted:
so many things
took your time away.

You can only wonder
what a few years
of focused reflection
might have gotten you.

Maybe they could have
helped ease the panic
before it all ended.
And maybe they wouldn't.

The Taste

They said it could be over.
You were sure the end was near.
The dread of being so sure.

Yet they turned out to be wrong.
It wasn't going to be over,
not with that kind of certainty.

But you had tasted how it felt
to be so sure that it was all over.
Now the dread of uncertainty.

If only you hadn't listened to them.
If only you had no ears to hear,
and no mouth with which to taste.

Impossibility

You descend
the staircase
in the darkness
alone
and pause
before taking
the last step.

Behind you
in a room
upstairs
your own
voice cries out,
an impossible
sound.

Lights turn on
and people
rush about

the house
without seeing
you there
on the last step.

Your Evacuation

The excrement
of life.
The purgative
of death.

Why not
relief?
Why only
Pain?

Pity.

Knowing

Before you existed,
before anything existed,
nobody knows what existed.

This was a long time ago.

Then something happened
that started other things happening
and later on you happened.

This was not so long ago.

Someday it all may all just stop
or it may never ever stop.
Start, stop, start, stop.

Nobody knows how long.

Counting the Ways

Millions of years,
billions of bodies.

Some are where
they last fell.

Some are where
they were put.

Some are buried,
some were burned.

Some are scattered
in little pieces.

Billions of bodies,
and then yours...

Fallen, burned, buried,
or in little pieces.

Odyssey

All sorts of paths
can lead to
all sorts of places.

Yet every place
ends up
as the same place.

This is the place
where the
paths are feeding you.

It's not the path
but the place it goes,
if you didn't know.

Request

You lie in the bed,
an arm full of tubes,
a mind full of drugs,
but still thinking.

You see the figure
enter the quiet room
and you lift your arm
and focus your mind.

You ask the doctor,
if it can be arranged,
that your last day
not be your worst day.

Thoughtful

When you're on your last legs,
whether you ‘re confined to a bed

or screaming in a crashed-up car,
many things may occur to you.

Something that won't occur to you,
either confined to a bed or screaming,
is that it doesn't matter what you
did or didn't do during your existence.

You won't think, “That's done with,
so why get excited at this last stage?”
Perhaps there are a few who may think
this way, but they are rare exceptions.

If only we could all think in this manner,
it might make up for what went before:
canceling out the chaos of our lives
and steadying us upon our last legs.

Carpe Diem?

Perhaps once in a while,
or possibly quite often,
it may strike you that
you are not yet dying,
not in any serious sense:
you can “seize the day”,
as has often been advised.

No reason not to follow
this bit of poetic wisdom
and to think of being alive
much as you might regard
some time off from work

or a vacation from school:
a carefree period of play.

This may be a simple view
but what else can you do
as you wait for the approach
of that awful Sunday night
before returning to the job
or the last day of summer
before the school bell rings?

Absolved of Debt

Possibly you're the kind
of person who's doesn't
save up for a rainy day
or worry about a bill left
unpaid for a month or two,
or even one long past due.

It's not that you're dumb
or lazy, anything like that,
but you believe in things
known by heart not head,
and these are what make
tomorrow easier to take.

This is how it is for you:
all the years of your life,
you've been assured
that nothing will happen,

when you're on the brink,
to prompt you to think.

Unthinkable

The thought unthinkable:
things will still be there
after you're not here.

All of the trees, the traffic:
Those scenes from a play
for which you didn't stay.

It makes much more sense
that when you are gone
the show won't go on.

Still, you leave things behind
pretty much as you found
them, but never mind—
you won't be around.

Night Voices

Why should you have to live?
We don't.
Why should you have to suffer?
We don't.
Why shouldn't you have to die?
We did.

Envoi
(Unknown Version)

First published in *Teatro Grottesco*, 2007

Nothing is for all
in this colony of puppets—
unvisioned in their variety
are the molded shapes,
the many-fashioned
players who do not speak
but only clack their jaws
whenever their faces meet,
saying nothing because
there is nothing to say.

And such a tangle of strings,
with some swaying loose—
pulling just slightly
on the figures in play,
those who have not vanished
from the buckling boards
of a tilted stage—
and some so taut
they incessantly rattle
the heads of all,
as if with vicious design…

To rattle them so cruelly
through every angle,
as if there could be
cruelty in a string
hanging in a blackness
that encloses completely
the little world
of the puppet colony,
where nothing is for all
and all is for nothing.

I Have A Special Plan For This World (Unknown Version)

Transcribed from the 2000 Current 93 release of the album *I Have A Special Plan For This World*, 2000

I

When everyone you have ever loved is finally gone. When everything you have ever wanted is finally done with. When all of your nightmares are for a time obscured, as by a shining brainless beacon, or a blinding eclipse of the many terrible shapes of this world. When you are calm and joyful and, finally, entirely alone. Then, in a great new darkness, you will finally execute your special plan.

II

“One needs to have a plan,” someone said, who was turned away into the shadows and who I had believed was sleeping or dead.

“Imagine,” he said, “all the flesh that is eaten. The teeth tearing into it, the tongue tasting its savour, and the hunger for that taste. Now, take away the flesh,” he said, “take away the teeth and the tongue, the taste and the hunger, take away everything as it is. That was my plan. My own special plan for this world.”

I listened to these words and yet I did not wonder if this creature, whom I had thought sleeping or dead, would ever approach his vision, even in his deepest dreams or his most lasting death. Because I had heard of such plans, such visions, and I knew they did not see far enough.

That what was demanded, in the way of a plan, needed to go beyond tongue and teeth and hunger and flesh, beyond the bones and the very dust of bones and the wind that would come to blow the dust away. And so I began to envision a darkness that was long before the dark of night, and a strangely shining light that owed nothing to the light of day.

III

That day may seem like other days. Once more we feel the tiny-legged trepidations. Once more we are mangled by a great grinding fear. But that day will have no others after. No more worlds like this will follow. Because I have a plan. A very special plan. No more worlds like this. No more days like that.

IV

"There are but four ways to die," a sardonic spirit might have said to me.

"There is dying that occurs relatively suddenly, there is dying that occurs relatively gradually, there is dying that occurs relatively painlessly, there is the death that is full of pain. Thus, by various means, they are combined—the sudden and the gradual, the painless and the painful—to yield but four ways to die. And there are no others."

Even after the voice stopped speaking I listened for it to speak again. After hours and days and years had passed I listened for some further words, yet all I heard were the faintest echoes reminding me there are no others. There are no others. Was it then that I began to conceive for this world a special plan?

V

There are no means for escaping this world. It penetrates even into your sleep and is its substance. You are caught in your own dreaming where there is no space, and are held forever where there is no time. You can do nothing you are not told to do. There is no hope for escape from this dream that was never yours. The very words you speak are only its very words and you talk like a traitor under its incessant torture.

VI

There are many who have designs upon this world and dream of wild and vast reformations. I have heard them talking in their sleep of elegant mutations and cunning annihilations. I have heard them whispering in the corners of crooked houses and in the alleys and narrow backstreets of this crooked, creaking universe, which they, with their new designs, would make straight and sound. But each of these new and ill conceived designs is deranged in its heart. For they see this world as if it were alone and original and not as only one of countless others whose nightmares all proceed like a hideous garden grown from a single seed.

I have heard these dreamers talking in their sleep and I stand waiting for them as at the top of a darkened flight of stairs. They know nothing of me and none of the secrets of my special plan, while I know every crooked, creaking step of theirs.

VII

It was the voice of someone who was waiting in the shadows, who was looking at the moon and waiting for me to turn the corner and enter a narrow street and stand with him in the dull glaze of moonlight.

Then he said to me, he whispered, that my plan was misconceived. That my special plan for this world was a terrible mistake.

“Because,” he said, “there is nothing to do, and there is nowhere to go. There is nothing to be and there is no one to know.”

“Your plan is a mistake,” he repeated.

“This world is a mistake,” I replied.

VIII

The children always followed him when they saw him hopping by.

A funny walk, a funny man, a funny, funny, funny man.

He made them laugh sometimes.

He made them laugh, oh yes he did, he did, he did, he did, he did.

Oh, how he made them roll.

One day he took them to a place he knew, a special place.

And told them things about this world, this funny, funny, funny world

Which made them laugh—sometimes.

He made them laugh, oh yes he did, he did, he did, he did, he did.

Oh, how he made them roll.

Then the funny little man who made them laugh—sometimes he did—revealed to them his special plan.

His very special funny plan, knowing they would understand and maybe laugh sometimes.

He made them laugh, oh yes he did, he did, he did, he did, he did.

Their eyes grew wide beneath their lids, and how he made them roll.

IX

I first learned the facts from a lunatic in a dark and quiet room that smelled of stale time and space.

“There are no people, nothing at all like that. The human phenomenon is but the sum of densely coiled layers of illusion, each of which winds itself upon the supreme insanity: that there are persons of any kind, when all there can be is mindless mirrors, laughing and screaming as they parade about in an endless dream.”

But when I asked the lunatic what it was that saw itself within these mirrors, as they marched endlessly in stale time and space, he only rocked and smiled.

Then he laughed and screamed, and in his black and empty eyes I saw for a moment, as in a mirror, a formless shade of divinity in flight from its stale infinity of time and space and the worst of all—of this world's dreams. My special plan for the laughter and the screams.

X

We went to see some little show that was staged in an old shed past the edge of town, and in its beginnings all seemed well. The miniature curtained stage glowed in the darkness while those dolls bounced along on their strings before our eyes. And in its beginnings all seemed well.

But then there came a subtle turning point which some had noticed, and I was one, who quietly left the show, though I did not. Because I could see where things were going. As the antics of those dolls grew strange and the fragile strings grew taut with the tiny pullings of tiny limbs, the others around me became appalled and turned away and aban-

doned the show that was staged in an old shed past the edge of town.

But I wanted to witness what could never be. I wanted to see what could not be seen: the moment of consummate disaster when puppets turn to face the puppet master.

XI

It was twilight and I stood in the grayish haze of the vast empty building when the silence was enriched by a reverberant voice.

"All the things of this world," it said, "are of but one essence for which there are no words. This is the greater part, which has no beginning or end, and the one essence of this world—for which there can be no words—is but all the things of this world. This is the lesser part, which had a beginning and shall have an end and for which words were conceived solely to speak of. The tiny broken beings of this world," it said, "The beginnings and endings of this world," it said, "For which words were conceived solely to speak of. Now remove these words and what remains?" it asked me, as I stood in the twilight of that vast empty building, but I did not answer. The question echoed over and over, but I remained silent until the echoes died. And as twilight passed into evening, I felt my special plan, for which there are no words, moving towards a greater darkness.

XII

There are some who have no voices or none that will ever speak, because the things they know about this world and

the things they feel about this world, because the thoughts that fill a brain that is a damaged brain, because the pain that fills a body that is a damaged body, exist in other worlds, countless other worlds, each of which stands alone in an infinite empty blackness for which no words have been conceived and where no voices are able to speak.

When a brain is filled only with damaged thoughts, when a damaged body is filled only with pain, and stands alone in a world surrounded by infinite, empty blackness, and exists in a world for which there is no special plan.

XIII

When everyone you have ever loved is finally gone.

When everything you have ever wanted is finally done with.

When all of your nightmares are for a time obscured, as by a shining brainless beacon, or a blinding eclipse of the many terrible shapes of this world.

When you are calm and joyful and finally, entirely alone.

Then, in a great new darkness, you will finally execute your special plan.

The Unholy City (2003 Crampton CD Version)

The following is a transcript of the spoken word CD *The Unholy City*, released in 2003 with the screenplay *Crampton* in a limited edition of 510 copies. The poems are recited by Ligotti over a minimal guitar accompaniment.

The Player Who Takes No Chances

There is a greater blackness than many would wish to see.

There is a greater blackness than most would care to contemplate.

There is a greater blackness.

Those who have tried to tell of the blackness have always found their words turned into nonsense.

Those who have tried to tell of the blackness have always found their memories lost or transformed into doctrines and philosophies they never intended; or possibly their bodies and minds, as they conceive such things, lost forever in the blackness that few would wish to see and most do not dare to contemplate.

There is a greater blackness.

Perhaps in their final moments they may realize, or be shown, that they were, after all, only unknowing players in a nameless, endless game.

Only unknowing players.

And after these souls have been thrown screaming into oblivion, no voice remains to tell the score, save the howling voice of the blackness.

There is a greater blackness.
There is a greater blackness.
No voice remains.
No voice remains.
No voice remains.

You Do Not Own Your Head

There are so many heads in the world. Wherever you go there are heads. Every day there are more of them sprouting up in the darkness.

At one time there was nothing at all, only blackness. And then, within the infinite spaces of that blackness, things started to develop. But as soon as those heads came along, nothing much has happened, or nothing worthy of note. The whole world reached its peak and turned into an enormous head factory.

Every day there are more and more of them, sprouting up in the blackness, which was there at the beginning; the blackness that, perhaps by chance, began to produce all these heads and continues to produce them, always calling out for more heads to carry out the business it wants done, its black voice roaring across the infinite black spaces of its head factory.

But none of the heads has any idea about the blackness that surrounds them, or the blackness that hides itself inside each one of them.

No One Knows The Big News

For all practical purposes almost no one is concerned with The Big News. They have other things, more urgent matters, inscribed within their skulls, and all kinds of busi-

ness to carry out. Their heads are just too heavy with so many plans and schemes, thousands of tasks that will not allow them to focus on anything that is so strange, anything that is so uncertain. They have no time to confront some ultimate revelation. They have no desire to find out so incredibly Big News. Such a thing would take everything they know and arrange it in another way altogether, telling a story so different from the one that is already familiar to them.

Yet The Big News is always there. Like a tiny voice on a radio it chatters away through heavy static in a darkened room where people are trying to sleep, filling their heads with plans and schemes, inscribing thousands of tasks and urgent matters inside of their skulls, all kinds of business to carry out—little errands, odd jobs, atrocities both great and small—all of which, when taken together, arrange things a different way that compose a secret story that no one cares to make their concern, yet The Big News is always there.

And so few will ever seek to discover, and none of them will ever be allowed to tell, that we ourselves are the dark language in which The Big News is forever being written.

Welcome to the Unholy City

In some form or another, everyone must pay a visit to the Unholy City. There is simply no avoiding it since everything has been designed to lead you to this place. Any road may present a detour that unexpectedly sends you on your way into a great barren landscape where only a sliver of horizon wavers in the empty distance and no road signs exist to hint at your destination. Any hospital may be equipped with the special elevator where someone wheels you inside and then

quickly abandons you. As the doors clamp tightly closed you finally notice that there are no buttons to push, no controls of any kind. This is when the elevator begins to move, dipping and twisting like a carnival ride, taking you toward the Unholy City.

After enduring such episodes, or others of a similar sort, you may only wake up screaming, vowing to never again close your eyes in sleep. Or you may fall into a fever that no thermometer is able to indicate and from which there is no recovery. In more extreme cases you begin to glimpse a blackness like none you have ever seen, and wonder for a time whether this blackness is inside your head or outside, which makes no difference once it begins to compose the outline of the Unholy City you're about to enter.

The Name Is Nothing

"The Unholy City" is a convenient misnomer. For one thing, it has none of the usual features which define a city of any size, and might be better described as a small town or village; an out-of- the-way place long gone to see. Unlike cities both ancient and modern, the unholy city has never been marked on a map. It is merely an ever changing name without a location, and is far more likely to find it's way to you, than you are to find your way to it—unless of course, you have been provided with special instructions that lead to an infinite barren landscape and end in the heart of nowhere.

As for the quality or characteristic of unholiness, this is also misleading, a nominal façade designed to make things interesting for a world born out of blackness, where nothing holy or unholy has ever existed, where nothing exists at all

except dreams and fevers and names for nothing, the creations, so to speak, of that original blackness which pulls itself over every world like a hangman's hood over a condemned man's head.

Nobody Is Anybody

Those of us who reside in The Unholy City, who sprouted out of the blackness of an old root cellar, or sprayed forth like dark ashes from an uncleaned chimney—those of us who are permanent citizens of The Unholy City are neither angels nor demons. Although, we are sometimes called upon to play such parts for the purpose of some game that has been going on since the world began; acting out our roles in a drawn-out and intricate stageshow that we will never understand, nor ever care to understand.

Nevertheless, we are really not so different from the tourists who sometimes visit our little town—and sometimes stay with us forever—who were also born of the same blackness as we were, as everything was.

Still, there is one respect in which we, the inhabitants of The Unholy City, diverge from all others in this world—who are so caught up in the game that is going on, who identify so completely with the parts they have been given to play in the stageshow universe, that they actually believe themselves to be somebody, or something. We, on the other hand, suffer from no such delusion. We are nobodies. We are nothings. And even to speak in such terms may be claiming too much for ourselves. Which is to say, we are just like everyone else, while they, without ever knowing or suspecting the true facts, are just like us.

Things They Will Never Tell You
(Unknown Version)

First published in *Teatro Grottesco*, 2006 (Durtro Press edition).

What Good Is Your Head?

The mysteries of a nightmare
or the ill magic of hallucinations
or even the way you are
conditioned to react
to an image of the moon
delivered straight into your eyes -
Why do they hide
what these things really are
and how they operate?
Why do they only answer
in such confused and conflicting terms?

The reason is simple.
Because who knows what might happen
if you could understand
the whining of nightmare-dogs
in your dreams
or the voices in your head
that never tell you
anything you want to hear
not to mention why you feel

a certain way
when images invade your eyes
and intrude upon the brain
that floats in the darkness
inside your head?

What would happen
if you knew what
these things really are
and how they operate -
What would happen to you
as a person who understands
what it means to have a head?

With this knowledge
you certainly might decide
to take your head right off
and just sit quietly in the dark
of your new headlessness.

What Happens To Faces

A tear in the face
it was as if you were dreaming
because they never said a word
and you were hiding
in a place
with no one around
when a tear in the face
and all the things
that came out

put an end to the world
that you always thought you knew.

And as if you were dreaming
a tear in the face
made you awake in a darkness
unlike any you have ever seen.

They could easily tell you
and then say you were dreaming
about a tear in the face
of a world in a mirror
where faces are glass
and are smooth
and are shining
till the glass starts to crack
all the faces are broken
and their scars are the shadows
that you always knew were there.

And as if you were dreaming
a tear in the face
was the last thing
and the worst that you ever saw.

They never will speak
even when you are dreaming
about a tear in the face
of a face that is made
of all the flesh that is grown
like a world in the body

that bursts forth from the darkness
shimmering in the darkness
or quivering for just a moment
in the face of a face
that will always be unknown.

But it was all so much dreaming
you finally see
it was just so much dreaming
you finally know -
a tear in the face
they would have to tell something
about something like that...
about a tear in the face.

What Becomes Of The Body

A little black box
they can hide
in the darkness
where it can never be found
and opened to your eyes
not because they are kind
or because they are wise
but only because...

A little black box
they can hide
in the darkness
is just the right thing
to keep you forever guessing

what they never would tell you
not that they are really concerned
you ever might find...

That little black box
and take out like toys
what is contained inside
and unearth all their secrets
such as how they deceive you
till the death of your body
and make you believe
that there actually might be
a little black box
that they hide in the darkness.

There Is Nothing To Do

Have they mentioned

that you could get by
quite easily without knowing
a single moment
of what we call joy
or what we call pleasure,
that you can exist
for many years,
a lifetime in fact
and be estranged
from anything
we might call happiness,
or simply relaxation,

yet continue to flourish
right up to the very second
that your own headstone
looms into view—
you know that it's true,
but have they ever mentioned this to you?

Have they ever mentioned
that no one could get by,
that nothing alive
could remain so for long
without the fear of hurt
and dread of harm,
without feeling
the frustration
or the anguish
or the full hell
of unmitigated torment
that is woven
into everything that lives
and comprises
the very threads
holding it all together and true—
have they ever mentioned this to you?

Pain is essential,
there is nothing else to do,
no other way to be:
we can call it
what we like,
say that pain

is something else,
or part of something else,
and never fret
about finding it
to be otherwise,
finding it untrue,
because pain is essential,
it is all there is—
so why
would they ever
mention this
to you?

Skull Crushing

Due to the nature
of physical existence,
they cannot avoid
imparting to select persons
what it means
to have one's skull crushed,
either slowly or quickly,
completely or partially,
whether one is deliberately
attacked by some skull crusher
or simply the victim
of some skull-crushing accident.

The reason that skull crushing
cannot entirely be kept
a secret by them
is that such an event involves,
in many cases,
not only great bodily pain
but also mental derangement

and intense emotional agony—
striking phenomena
that are difficult to conceal,
even to the imagination of a brain
that has not undergone
an actual incidence
of skull crushing.

Nevertheless, they have succeeded
in restricting the knowledge
of what it means
to have one's skull crushed
to the extent
that it is not
a vital factor
in forming the way
the population in general
thinks about what it means
to sustain
lasting and excruciating damage
to any part of the human body,
whether this part is a skull
or the brain inside that skull…
not to mention the spine
and the similar developments
that may ensue
from spinal crushing
or even the effects
of a pernicious disease
affecting some other part
of the anatomy
that may be crushed
from the inside
one cell at a time.

Insanity And Nothingness

Stuff and nonsense,
Insanity, derangement,
whatever name you want to use:
we can't get enough of it—
they have made sure of that.

Offer us nothingness
and we will
pass it by without a glance,
given its invisibility
to our sight—
they have made sure of that too.

In the dark corridors
of our brains
and the black chaos
of the world's marketplace,
we will rush about,
as if in a dream,
to grab at every piece
of pulsing inventory
paraded out—
a galaxy of
arbitrary objects
in all shapes and colors,
a full array
of unrequested needs,
unrequested impulses,
and of course
every accessory imaginable
for those motley costumes of agony
we are forced to wear
every day of our lives…

seizing such merchandise
with a death-grip
and recoiling only
when our hands
feel nothing
in their closing grasp.

Between insanity
and nothingness
the choice
was determined
from the outset—
they made sure of everything.

Bottom line:
No one is in the market
for nothingness,
while insanity,
since time began,
has always been
flying off the shelves.

The Sellers

Which of them would
ever say that all they
have to sell is a piece
of fruit gone rotten?

Shriveled and yet
still pale green
with a dying life
made of mold.

They would never

tell you that what
they are selling
is something spoiled.

A piece of fruit
left forgotten,
unfit to be sold,
and ripe with pain.

Introductions and Afterwords

Introduction to Grimscribe (2011 Version)

Introduction to Grimscribe (1991 Version)

Introduction to The Agonizing Resurrection Of Victor Frankenstein, Citizen Of Geneva

Foreword to Noctuary (2011 Version)

Foreword to Noctuary (1994 Version)

Foreword to The Shadow At The Bottom Of The World

Horror Stories: A Nightmare Scenario

Introduction To Grimscribe (2011 Grimscribe Version)

His name is...

Will it ever come to me? There is a grand lapse of memory that may be the only thing to save us from ultimate horror. Perhaps they know the truth who preach the passing of one life into another, vowing that between a certain death and a certain birth there is an interval in which an old name is forgotten before a new one is learned. And to remember the name of a former life is to begin the backward slide into that great blackness in which all names have their source, becoming incarnate in a succession of bodies like numberless verses of an infinite scripture.

To find that you have had so many names is to lose claim to any one of them. To gain the memory of so many lives is to lose them all.

So he keeps his name secret, his many names. He hides each one from all the others, so that they will not become lost among themselves. Protecting his life from all his lives, from the memory of so many lives, he hides behind the mask of anonymity.

But even if I cannot know his name, I have always known his voice. That is one thing he can never disguise, even if it sounds like many different voices. I know his voice when I hear it speak, because it is always speaking of terrible secrets. It speaks of the most grotesque mysteries and encounters, sometimes with despair, sometimes with delight, and sometimes with a spirit not possible to define. What

crime or curse has kept him turning upon this same wheel of terror, spinning out his tales which always tell of the strangeness and horror of things? When will he make an end to his telling?

He has told us so many things, and he will tell us more. Yet he will never tell his name. Not before the very end of his old life, and not after the beginning of each new one. Not until time itself has erased every name and taken away every life.

But until then, everyone needs a name. Everyone must be called something. So what can we say is the name of everyone?

Our name is GRIMSCRIBE.

This is our voice.

Introduction To Grimscribe (1991 Grimscribe Version)

His name is...

Will it ever come to me? There is a grand lapse of memory that may be the only thing to save us from ultimate horror. Perhaps they know the truth who preach the passing of one life into another, vowing that between a certain death and a certain birth there is an interval in which an old name is forgotten before a new one is learned. And to remember the name of a former life is to begin the backward slide into that great blackness in which all names have their source, becoming incarnate in a succession of bodies like numberless verses of an infinite scripture.

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But until then, everyone needs a name. Everyone must be called something. So what can we say is the name of everyone?

Our name is **Grimscribe**. This is our voice.

Introduction To The Agonizing Resurrection Of Victor Frankenstein, Citizen Of Geneva (1994)

Good-Tom-Go-Lightly by Michael Shea
In vault or tunnel, catacomb or tomb
In cellar, basement, attic, shuttered room
They lurk, lurch, limp, snake, scuttle, shamble, slither,
On vast membraneous wings swoop hence, or hither;
They snarl, gasp, croak, hiss, cackle, groan or quaver;
Leak slime, putrescence, venom, gore or slaver;
Stretch feelers, talons, tentacles or paws
To seize and stuff us in their reeking maws!
All scribblers who the Snake-Haired Muse invoke,
So be their styles post-modern or baroque,
Have summoned up with profit—ours and theirs—
These well-known monsters with their baleful stares,
And oft and oft we of their tribe have joyed
To see these veteran legionnaires deployed
These, Dame Horror's host of Damned Things
(Long sung by sonorous P-es and gaseous K—gs)
Still, Dame Medusa freezes up the heart
As well by subtler and more various art.
Tis true that demons fronted face to face
Do pluck us to a vaster Time and Space,
By their mere being make th’ Abyss sublime—

Still, more intricately awe-ful Space and Time
Are wrought by indirection, melody,
A calm unravelling of reality…
    Good Tom-Go-Lightly, tunefullest of fellows!
It's not his style to wave his arms and bellow,
Nor grunt, nor rant—he loves the English tongue!
Lute-limpid lines across his page are strung,
Whence eyes pluck that which woos the inner ear
Through inward mazes, to new realms of fear.
    Not that ghastly, snouted Things are lacking,
Nor mindless screams from those they are attacking—
Nor human food a-squirm with larvel bulges
Whose rupture the Unspeakable divulges…
But best in Tom is where his tales are set;
His webs of streets and rooms, flung like a net,
Capture cosmoi quite outside our own;
The streets and rooms of Tom-Go-Lightly's town
Feel astir, we sense they're membrane-thin
That adjunct mazes stretch without/within
Breathing and murmuring through th' environing walls,
While Unreal things steal rat-like through the halls.
    Thus gladly do we hail this *Resurrection*—
These graceful *pizzicati* give selection
Of all the notes that tuneful Tom can hit—
There's magic here in every whim-some bit!
Come tread these floating bridges, hung between
Marvels known and marvels not yet seen—
Spans of rare language islanded betwixt
Great works foregone, and where they might go next
Unanchored arcs of fancy that convey
The wonder-lusting mind up, and away!

Michael Shea
Healdsburg, California
July 16, 1994

In The Night, In The Dark (2011 Noctuary Version)

A Note on the Appreciation of Weird Fiction

No one needs to be told about what is weird. It is something that becomes known in the early stages of every life. With the very first nightmare or a childhood bout of fever, an initiation takes place into a universal, and at the same time very secret society. Membership in this society is renewed by a lifelong series of encounters with the weird, which may assume a variety of forms and wear many faces. Some of these forms and faces are private to a certain person, while others are recognized by practically everybody, whether or not they will admit it. But they are always there, waiting to be recalled in those special moments that are all its own.

So the point is clear: experience of the weird is a fundamental and inescapable fact of life. And, like all such facts, it eventually finds its way into forms of artistic expression. One of those forms has been termed, of all things, weird fiction. The stories that constitute this literary genre are repositories of the weird. They are a vast museum where the weird is on permanent display and may be studied.

For example, on display there is a well-known story that goes as follows: *A man awakes in the darkness and reaches over for his eyeglasses on the nightstand. The eyeglasses are placed in his hand.*

This is the bare bones of so many tales that have caused readers to shiver with a sense of the weird. You might simply accept this shiver and pass on to other things; you might even try to suppress the full power of this episode if it be too vividly conceived. On the other hand, it is possible, and considered by some to be desirable, to achieve the optimal receptiveness to the incident in question, to open up to it in order to allow its complete effect and suggestiveness to take hold.

This is not a matter of deliberate effort; on the contrary, how much more difficult it is to put this scene out of one's mind, especially if such a story is read at the proper time and under proper circumstances. Then it happens that a reader's own mind is filled with the darkness of that room in which someone, anyone, awakes. Then it happens that the inside of a reader's skull becomes the shadow-draped walls of that room and the whole drama is contained in a place from which there is no escape.

Stripped-down as this tale is, it nonetheless does not lack for plot. There is the most natural of beginnings, the perfect action of the middle, and a curtain-closer of an end that drops down darkness upon darkness. There is a protagonist and an antagonist and a meeting between them which, abrupt as it is, remains crystalline in its fateful nature. No epilogue is required to settle the issue that the man has awakened to something that has been waiting for him, and for no one else, in that dark room. And the weirdness of it, looked full in the face, can be quite affecting.

Once again: *A man awakes in the darkness and reaches over for his eyeglasses on the nightstand.* The eyeglasses are placed in his hand.

At this point it should be recalled that there is an old identity between the words “weird” and “fate” (of which one notable modern instance is Clark Ashton Smith's *The Weird of Avoosl Wuthoqquan*, the fate of the title character being one that is prophesied by a beggar and consummated by a famished monstrosity). And this old pair of synonyms insists on the resurrection of an old philosophy, even the oldest—that of fatalism.

To perceive, even if mistakenly, that all one's steps have been heading toward a prearranged appointment, to realize one has come face to face with what seems to have been waiting all along—this is the necessary framework, the supporting skeleton of the weird. Of course, fatalism, as a philosophical slant on human existence, has long since been out of fashion, eclipsed by a taste for indeterminacy and a mockup of an “open-ended” universe. It nevertheless happens that certain ordeals in the lives of actual people may reinstate an ancient, irrational view of things. Such ordeals always strike one with their strangeness, their digression from the normal flow of events, and often provoke a universal protest: “Why me?” Be sure that this is not a question but an outcry. The person who screams it has been instilled with an astonishing suspicion that he, in fact, has been the perfect subject for a very specific “weird,” a tailor-made fate, and that a prior engagement, in all its weirdness, was fulfilled at the appointed time and place.

No doubt this queer sense of destiny is an illusion. And the illusion is created by the same stuff that fleshes out the skeletal framework of the weird. This is the stuff of dreams, of fever, of unheard-of encounters; it clings to the bones of the weird and fills out its various forms and fills in its many

faces. In order for the illusion of fate to be most deeply established, it must be connected to some matter that is out of the ordinary, something that was not considered part of the existential plan, though in retrospect cannot be seen otherwise.

After all, no weird revelation is involved when someone sees a dime on the sidewalk, picks up the coin, and pockets it. Even if this is not an everyday occurrence for a given individual, it remains without any overtones or implications of the fateful, the extraordinary. But suppose this coin has some unusual feature that, upon investigation, reveals it to be a token of considerable wealth and of weirdness. Suddenly a great mishap changes someone's life; suddenly the expected course of things veers off toward wholly unforeseen destinations. Whoever is unfortunate enough to notice the aforesaid object on the sidewalk and lay claim to it eventually realizes something: he has been lured into a trap, and his fate has been sealed. How difficult it is to imagine that things might have been different for him. The former prospects of his life become distant and can now be seen to have been tentative in any case. What did he ever really know about the path his life was on before he came upon that coin? Obviously very little. And even now, what does he know about such things since they took such a melodramatic turn? No more than he ever did, which becomes yet more apparent when he eventually falls victim to an uncanny numismatist who wants his rare coin returned. Then our finder-keeper comes into a terrible knowledge about the strange, the mysterious, the truly weird aspect of his existence—the extraordinary fact of the universe and of one's be-

ing in it. Paradoxically, it is the uncommon event that may best demonstrate the common predicament of our race.

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The principal effect of weird fiction is a sense of what might be called *macabre unreality*: "macabre" because of that skeleton of fate, which points its exposed finger in the direction of doom; "unreal" because of the extraordinary habiliments of that fate, a flapping garb of mystery which will never uncover its secret. The double sense of macabre unreality attains its most piercing intensity in the enigma that is at the center of every great weird story. And it is this quality that forms the focus of one's appreciation of the weird in fiction.

By definition the weird story is based on an enigma that can never be dispelled if it be true to the weird experience—which may occur entirely in an author's imagination—that serves as its only justifiable provenance. While this enigma will definitely exude an ambiance of the graveyard, it menaces as much by its unreal nature, its disorienting strangeness, as by its connections with the great world of death. Such a narrative scheme is usefully contrasted with that of the realistic "suspense" story, in which a character is threatened with a familiar, often purely physical doom. Whatever identifiable manifestations and phenomena are presented in a weird story—from traditional ghosts to the scientific nightmares of the modern age—there remains at the heart of the tale a kind of abyss from which the weird emerges and into which it cannot be pursued for purposes of analysis or resolution. Some enigmatic quality *must* be preserved if these terrible fatalities are to retain their allure.

Like the finder of that “valuable” coin, the man who awakes in the night and reaches out for his eyeglasses is brought into proximity with the absolute unknown, on this occasion in the form of a thing without a name. This is an extreme instance, perhaps the purest example, of a plot that recurs throughout the history of weird fiction.

Another, more distinguished, example of the enigmatic plot of a weird tale is that paradigm of weirdness—H. P. Lovecraft's *The Colour Out of Space*. In this story a complex of phenomena and events is set off by an intruding force of unknown origin and nature that comes to settle itself in a dark well at the center of the narrative and from there proceeds to rule like a faceless tyrant over every mechanism of the plot. When it finally makes its exit toward the end of the story, neither the characters involved nor the reader know anything more about this visitor than they did at the beginning. This last statement is not entirely factual: what everyone quite certainly learns about the “colour” is that contact with this apparition from the stars is an introduction to that macabre unreality that is both a commonplace of the weird and yet also an experience to which one never grows accustomed—and with which one is *never* at ease.

Still other examples of the all-important enigma on which the great weird stories are founded could be proffered, from E. T. A. Hoffmann's *The Sandman* to Ramsey Campbell's *The Scar*,but the point is evident by now: what is truly weird in both literature and life carries only a minimum of flesh on its bones—enough to allow certain issues to be raised and evoke the properly gruesome response but never so much that the shredded fingers stretched out to us turn into the customary glad hand of everyday affairs.

Admittedly, the extraordinary as a shaper of one's fate—that is, one's inevitable death—is a rather ostentatious and, more often than not, vulgar device for representing human existence. However, weird fiction seeks not to place before us the routine procedures most of our kind follow on the way to the grave but to recover some of the amazement we sometimes feel, and should probably feel more often, at existence in its essential aspect. To reclaim this sense of amazement at the monumentally macabre unreality of life is to awaken to the weird—just as the man awakens in the perpetual hell of his brief story, shakes off his sleep-dulled sensibility, and reaches out to that unknown thing in the darkness. Now, even without his eyeglasses, he can truly see. And perhaps, if only for that moment of artificial terror that weird fiction affords, so can the rest of us.

In The Night, In The Dark (1994 Noctuary Version)

A Note on the Appreciation of Weird Fiction

No one needs to be told about what is weird. It is something that becomes known in the early stages of every life. With the very first nightmare or a childhood bout of fever, an initiation takes place into a universal, and at the same time very secret society. Membership in this society is renewed by a lifelong series of encounters with the weird, which may assume a variety of forms and wears many faces. Some of these forms and faces are familiar only to oneself, while others are recognized by practically everybody, whether they will admit it or not.

Weird experience is in fact so prevalent that it is taken profoundly for granted, lying unnoticed in the back rooms of a person's life and even further removed in the life of the world at large. But it is always there, waiting to be recalled in those special moments that are all its own. These moments are for the most part rather brief and relatively rare: the intense weirdness of a dream fades upon waking and is often utterly forgotten; the twisted thoughts of a delirium soon uncoil themselves upon recovery from illness; even a first-hand, wide-awake confrontation with the extraordinary may lose the shocking strangeness it initially possessed and ultimately consign itself to one of those back rooms, those waiting rooms of the weird.

So the point is clear: experience of the weird is a fundamental and inescapable fact of life. And, like all such facts, it eventually finds its way into forms of artistic expression. One of those forms has been termed, of all things, weird fiction. The stories that constitute this literary genre are repositories of the weird; they are something like those remote rooms where the dreams and deliriums and spectral encounters are kept, except that they may be visited at any time and thus make up a vast museum where the weird is on permanent display.

But does anyone need to be told what weird fiction is all about, anymore than an introduction is required to the weird itself? It is strongly possible that the answer to this question is yes. The reason for this answer is that weird fiction is not something experienced in the same way by everyone: it is not a nightmare or a fit of fever; certainly it is not a meeting in the mist with something that is not supposed to be. It is only a type of story, and a story is an echo or a transmutation of experience, while also an experience in its own right, different from any other in the way it happens to someone and in the way it is felt. It seems probable, then, that the experience of weird stories can be enhanced and illuminated by focusing on their special qualities, their various forms and many faces.

For example, there is a well-known story that goes as follows: A man awakes in the darkness and reaches over for his eyeglasses on the nightstand. The eyeglasses are placed in his hand.

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even try to suppress the full power of this episode if it be too vividly conceived. On the other hand, it is possible, and considered by some to be desirable, to achieve the optimal receptiveness to the incident in question, to open up to it in order to allow its complete effect and suggestiveness to take hold.

This is not a matter of deliberate effort; on the contrary, how much more difficult it is to put this scene out of one's mind, especially if such a story is read at the proper time and under proper circumstances. Then it happens that a reader's own mind is filled with the darkness of that room in which someone, anyone, awakes. Then it happens that the inside of a reader's skull becomes the shadow-draped walls of that room and the whole drama is contained in a place from which there is no escape.

Stripped-down as this tale is, it nonetheless does not lack for plot. There is the most natural of beginnings, the perfect action of the middle, and a curtain-closer of an end that drops down darkness upon darkness. There is a protagonist and an antagonist and a meeting between them which, abrupt as it is, remains crystalline in its fateful nature. No epilogue is required to settle the issue that the man has awakened to something that has been waiting for him, and for no one else, in that dark room. And the weirdness of it, looked full in the face, can be quite affecting.

Once again: A man awakes in the darkness and reaches over for his eyeglasses on the nightstand. The eyeglasses are placed in his hand.

At this point it should be recalled that there is an old identity between the words “weird” and “fate” (of which one notable modern instance is Clark Ashton Smith's *The Weird*

of Avoosl Wuthoqquan, the fate of the title character being one that is prophesied by a beggar and consummated by a famished monstrosity). And this old pair of synonyms insists on the resurrection of an old philosophy, even the oldest—that of fatalism.

To perceive, even if mistakenly, that all one's steps have been heading toward a prearranged appointment, to realize one has come face to face with what seems to have been waiting all along—this is the necessary framework, the supporting skeleton of the weird. Of course, fatalism, as a philosophical slant on human existence, has long since been out of fashion, eclipsed by a taste for indeterminacy and a mock-up of an "open-ended" universe. It nevertheless happens that certain ordeals in the lives of actual people may reinstate an ancient, irrational view of things. Such ordeals always strike one with their strangeness, their digression from the normal flow of events, and often provoke a universal protest: "Why me?" Be sure that this is not a question but an outcry. The person who screams it has been instilled with an astonishing suspicion that he, in fact, has been the perfect subject for a very specific "weird," a tailor-made fate, and that a prior engagement, in all its weirdness, was fulfilled at the appointed time and place.

No doubt this queer sense of destiny is an illusion. And the illusion is created by the same stuff that fleshes out the skeletal framework of the weird. This is the stuff of dreams, of fever, of unheard-of encounters; it clings to the bones of the weird and fills out its various forms and fills in its many faces. Because in order for the illusion of fate to be most deeply established, it must be connected to some matter that is out of the ordinary, something that was not considered

part of the existential plan, though in retrospect cannot be seen otherwise.

After all, no weird revelation is involved when someone sees a dime on the sidewalk, picks up the coin, and pockets it. Even if this is not an everyday occurrence for a given individual, it remains without any overtones or implications of the fateful, the extraordinary. But suppose this coin has some unusual feature that, upon investigation, makes it a token of considerable wealth. Suddenly a great change, or at least the potential for change, enters into someone's life; suddenly the expected course of things threatens to veer off toward wholly unforeseen destinations.

It could seem that the coin might have been overlooked as it lay on the pavement, that its finder might easily have passed it by as others surely had done. But whoever has found this unusual object and discovers its significance soon realizes something: he has been lured into a trap and is finding it difficult to imagine that things might have been different. The former prospects of his life become distant and can now be seen to have been tentative in any case: what did he ever really know about the path his life was on before he came upon that coin? Obviously very little. But what does he know about such things now that they have taken a rather melodramatic turn? No more than he ever did, which becomes even more apparent when he eventually falls victim to a spectral numismatist who wants his rare coin returned. Then our finder-keeper comes into a terrible knowledge about the unknowable, the mysterious, the truly weird aspect of his existence—the extraordinary fact of the universe and of one's being in it. Paradoxically, it is the uncommon event that may best demonstrate the common predicament.

At the same time the weird is, to repeat, a relatively elusive, unwonted phenomenon making its appearance in the moments that upset the routine and that are most willingly forgotten. As it happens in real life, the nightmare serves primarily to impart an awareness of what it means to be awake; the unfavorable diagnosis most often merely offers a lesson in the definition of health; and the supernatural itself cannot exist without the predominant norms of nature.

In fiction, however, those periods may be prolonged in which someone is trapped in an extraordinary fate. The entrapments presented in weird fiction may go so far as to be absolute, a full illustration of what was always in the works and only awaited discovery. Because the end of any weird story is also quite often a definitive end for the characters involved. Thus, it only remains for the reader to appreciate a foregone conclusion, a fate that is presented, in a manner of speaking, at arm's length.

The principal effect of weird fiction is a sense of what might be called macabre unreality: “macabre” because of that skeleton of fate, which points its exposed finger in the direction of doom; “unreal” because of the extraordinary habiliments of that fate, a flapping garb of mystery which will never uncover its secret. The double sense of macabre unreality attains its most piercing intensity in the enigma that is at the center of every great weird story. And it is this quality that forms the focus of one's appreciation of the weird in fiction.

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By definition the weird story is based on an enigma that can never be dispelled if it be true to the weird experience—

which may occur entirely in an author's imagination—that serves as its only justifiable provenance. While this enigma will definitely exude an ambiance of the graveyard, it menaces as much by its unreal nature, its disorienting strangeness, as by its connections with the great world of death. Such a narrative scheme is usefully contrasted with that of the realistic "suspense" story, in which a character is threatened with a familiar, often purely physical doom. Whatever identifiable manifestations and phenomena are presented in a weird story—from traditional ghosts to the scientific nightmares of the modern age—there remains at the heart of the tale a kind of abyss from which the weird emerges and into which it cannot be pursued for purposes of analysis or resolution. Some enigmatic quality is thereby preserved in these tales of nameless and terrible unknowns. Like the finder of that "valuable" coin, the man who awakes in the night and reaches out for his eyeglasses is brought into proximity with an unknown, on this occasion in the form of a thing without a name. This is an extreme instance, perhaps the purest example, of a plot that recurs throughout the history of weird fiction.

Another, more distinguished, example of the enigmatic plot of a weird tale is that paradigm of weirdness—H. P. Lovecraft's *The Colour out of Space*. In this story a complex of phenomena and events is set off by an intruding force of unknown origin and nature that comes to settle itself in a dark well at the center of the narrative and from there proceeds to rule like a faceless tyrant over every mechanism of the plot. When it finally makes its exit toward the end of the story, neither the characters involved nor the reader knows anything more about this visitor than they did at the begin-

ning. This last statement is not entirely factual: what everyone quite certainly learns about the "colour" is that contact with this apparition from the stars is an introduction to that macabre unreality that is both a commonplace of the weird and yet also an experience to which one never grows accustomed—and with which one is never at ease.

Still other examples of the all-important enigma on which the great weird stories are founded could be proffered, from E. T. A. Hoffman's *The Sandman* to Ramsey Campbell's *The Scar*, but the point is evident by now? what is truly weird in both literature and life only carries a minimum of flesh on its bones—enough to allow certain issues to be raised and evoke the properly gruesome response but never so much that the shredded fingers stretched out to us turn into the customary gladhand of everyday affairs.

Admittedly, the extraordinary as a shaper of one's fate—that is, one's inevitable death—is a rather ostentatious and, more often than not, vulgar device for representing human existence. However, weird fiction seeks not to place before us the routine procedures most of our kind follow on the way to the grave but to recover some of the amazement we sometimes feel, and should probably feel more often, at existence in its essential aspect. To reclaim this sense of amazement at the monumentally macabre unreality of life is to awaken to the weird—just as the man in the room awakens in the perpetual hell of his brief story, shakes off his sleep-dulled sensibility, and reaches out to that unknown thing in the darkness. Now, even without his eyeglasses, he can truly see. And perhaps, if only for that moment of artificial terror that weird fiction affords, so can the rest of us.

Foreword To The Shadow At The Bottom Of The World (2005)

In the historical development of the artistic horror story, there are three major figures. The first is, of course, Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), the father of the modern psychological horror story. The next, chronologically, is H. P. Lovecraft (1890-1937), who brought cosmicism—an awareness of the vastness of the universe and of the insignificance of the human race— to the weird tale. And now there is Thomas Ligotti (b. 1953), who has extended Lovecraft's cosmicism by suggesting that an inescapable malignancy and nightmare inheres in all existence, manifesting itself in both the individual psyche and the physical cosmos. Interestingly, these three writers have found the short story rather than the novel to be their ideal vehicle for expression.

For Ligotti, “the short story allows a purer and more intense expression of horror… than do novels.”

Born in Detroit, Ligotti grew up in a nearby suburb and in 1977 graduated from Wayne State University with a B.A. in English. From 1979 to 2001 he worked in the literary criticism division of the Gale Research Company (now Thomson Gale), a publisher of reference books. Ligotti then moved to Florida, where he makes his living as an editorial freelancer.

He began writing horror fiction around 1976, and published his first short story in 1981. His first book, a small press collection entitled *Songs of a Dead Dreamer*, came out in

an edition of 300 copies in 1985. Today it is a highly-prized rarity. An expanded edition appeared from a trade publisher in 1989, followed by further collections: *Grimscribe* (1991), *Noctuary* (1994), and the omnibus volume *The Nightmare Factory* (1996). Since then Ligotti has worked mostly with small publishers, like Durtro Press, which has issued elegant limited editions like *In a Foreign Town, In a Foreign Land* (1997), a collection of four interconnected stories; an unproduced screenplay, *Crampton* (2002), written in collaboration with Brandon Trenz; and some small books of Ligotti's verse, *I Have a Special Plan for This World* (2000), *This Degenerate Little Town* (2001), and *Death Poems* (2004).

In 1994, Silver Salamander Press collected Ligotti's vignettes in *The Agonizing Resurrection of Victor Frankenstein & Other Gothic Tales*. Another small press, Mythos Books, has published *My Work Is Not Yet Done: Three Tales of Corporate Horror* (2002), whose eponymous story is Ligotti's lengthiest tale. Forthcoming from Mythos Books is Ligotti's long essay, *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race: On the Horror of Life and the Art of Horror*, a kind of personal credo of Ligotti's views on life and literature. The two main websites devoted to Ligotti's work are Thomas Ligotti Online (www.ligotti.net) and The Art of Grimscribe (www.ligotti.de.vu). Both websites have a complete Ligotti bibliography, and much else of interest.

The stories in this volume were selected by Ligotti and myself as an introductory sampler of his works. They are arranged in the order in which they were written. Thus, The Last Feast of Harlequin— which Ligotti has referred to as the first story he wrote that he thought was good enough not to throw away—opens the collection, and Purity, one of his

most recent tales, concludes it. The bulk of these stories, however, date from the late 1980s and early 1990s, Ligotti's most productive period.

Unlike the bulk of horror fiction past and present, Ligotti's work is essentially outside the tradition of strict realism in which a neatly demarcated natural world is threatened by a supernatural menace, an aberration in the normal course of things that more often than not maybe combated and conquered.

In the universe of Ligotti's fiction, the natural and the supernatural merge into the same nightmare; to distinguish them is meaningless and no salvation is to be found in this world or any other. As Ligotti has noted, many of his stories "focus on those anomalous moments in which a character's perception of his world is shaken and he is forced to confront a frightening and essentially chaotic universe." Which is, in its way, a realism of the highest order.

—Douglas A. Anderson

Horror Stories: A Nightmare Scenario (2005)

Extracted from the forthcoming book, The Conspiracy against the Human Race: On the Horror of Life and the Art of Horror.

For a horror story to be effective, it must both reflect and deform the world we know, the place in which we eat and fight and procreate. This means that it must not intrude on the sacred ground already being worked by established institutions of faith, which at some point inevitably deviate into the unknowable in order to comfort their audience rather than distress them. Should it follow this craven path, the horror story would lose its greatest value—the power to convey truths that have currency with respect to our evolving trepidations rather than perpetuating some primitive lore of the remote past. A literary law that only the greatest writers in the genre, such as Edgar Allan Poe and H. P. Lovecraft, have followed in their writings maybe stated as follows: No horror tale shall take advantage of its readers by playing upon their religious beliefs. This is an easy and a vile game that only the lowest form of scribe would perpetrate on those who already have their heads filled with all kinds of fears conditioned into them since they were children in the hands of an angry god. Fortunately, we find that a model for creating horror has been provided for us that has nothing to do with preachers and pulpits and the puppetry of doctrinal compliance. This model is given to us in the form of nightmares, which conform to no orthodoxies except those of our

developing fears. No bad dream ever ended with its dreamer finding salvation from his mind's hell. Such finales are always invented after the fact by storytellers with a redemptive agenda.

As necessity dictates to most of us that we must be conscious of death, disease, damage, and derangement, however reluctantly and infrequently we submit to this knowledge, it also forces us to leave that world on a regular timetable and enter another one where we face horrors beyond the natural, warped realities that are produced simply because our brains have shifted to a different mode of activity and that by the reckoning of our wide-awake selves can only be described as lunatic. An equally apt term would be "supernatural," since there obtains a tradition of symbolically equating states of mental abnormality with bizarre incidents in the "real" world, as elaborated by Sigmund Freud in his famous essay *The Uncanny* (1919). This is the basis for the longtime association between the supernatural and horror fiction. When we take a ghost from our dreams and place it in the context of waking consciousness, if only in the pages of a ghost story, we have chosen, as though freely and of our own will, to engage in the metaphysics of the mistake. The point of this act is a tangle of motives we cannot begin to unravel any better than all the other actions in which we engage on this earth. The only thing that is certain is that we do this because we are driven to do it. But such speculation is distracting us from our concern of the moment, which is the plot of a supernatural horror story and its source in the nightmare.

It is usually a long and twisted road between the nightmare and a horror story.

As far as offering a writer some useful storyline, nightmares are notorious for generating plots that are either wearyingly simple, and therefore unaffecting outside the confines of the dream, or too complicated to sort out for any kind of sense. Of course, the same might be said of our waking existence. On the one hand, its course tends to present a few basic routines that have no interest in themselves once we strip them down to their bare bones. But we must go through these motions if the show is to go on. We eat because we are hungry and will die if we fail to heed that hunger. We work because we need to provide ourselves with food as well as shelter from the elements. We sleep because we are tired and need to recharge ourselves so that we can work, which in turn enables us to feed and shelter ourselves. But these routines, and the kind of sense behind them, are not sufficient fodder for fiction and would make for painful reading.

On the other hand, things can get so involved and mysterious in our lives that we are hard pressed to determine what is happening or why. One day we are just punching the clock at the biological factory, and the next day we find ourselves embroiled in the strangest situation because we saw a pretty face or got wind of some words that set off a conflagration of rage that may last only a matter of hours or could drag on for years. At first we may take a stab at explanations, but ultimately we are at a loss to name the mechanism of our initial impulse, to follow its developments and counter-developments, and to know what happened in the end. This is one of the reasons we engage in such activities as reading fiction in the first place: we are unsatisfied or frustrated by the both the basic tedium and the inconclusive, strung-along com-

plexity of our lives. They lack something we desire—meaning... or, in other words, a plot. No other creature in this world requires anything in the way of meaning, but we appear to be burdened with this desire. This is why the Norwegian philosopher Peter Wessel Zapffe regarded human beings as a mistake in the world of nature. We have a desire that can never be satisfied, a need that is not natural, or at least one that is not found elsewhere in nature's kingdom. Nevertheless, we will persist in chasing the impossible and ultimately die trying. This is the tragedy of human existence that Zapffe concluded we do our best to cover up in order to tolerate an existence that holds terrors for us at every turn. Hence, we make up narratives that are rich with meaning, conspiring among ourselves to tell lies in order to create the coherence that both our waking and dreaming lives withhold from us. Thus, there are the mythologies, the religions, and even scientific scenarios that open with a big bang, continue until some characters come along, and then end in entropy. At this stage in history, it may seem unnecessary and more than a little trite to go over this ground upon which so many have trod before us. But we are here concerned with fictional plots— specifically, with plotting a course between the nightmare and the horror story. If we have again wandered off the topic, this should be no surprise. Indeed, we may profit from wandering a bit further.

Part of our inheritance as conscious organisms—creatures who are aware of being alive and know about the inescapability of death— is that we are subject to having nightmares. Every move we make in our lives entails risk. What we risk each time we lie down to sleep is that our minds will drift off like a balloon into a sky freaked with

clouds and shadows and be battered about in misadventures of unimaginable madness. While our bodies are held in paralysis, unless we are sleepwalkers, our consciousness is distorted to the point of the psychotic, roaming through the backstreets of our brains… until the moment when the intensity of our horror becomes too much to allow our slumber to persist, and we are jarred back into wakefulness.

Yet if the nightmare has sufficiently shaken us, it may take some time before we are fully awake. We are alert enough to reach for the lamp and scramble from our bed, rubbing our eyes as if to wipe away the visions to which we have been victim and pressing our hands to our temples to feel our way back to the familiar ground of flesh. But the world of the nightmare has not yet been left behind. So we evacuate that room which has become a chamber of horrors and seek out some other place in our residence—somewhere that is not infected by the insanity we have just endured, somewhere that will accommodate our bodies in an upright position so that we are not prone to sink back into that insane darkness from which we are trying to emerge. Once seated, we may moan and curse in the aftermath of the frightening ordeal through which our consciousness has taken us. The residue of things we never believed we would suffer still plagues our heads with images that keep popping up in the darkness inside us and inner scenarios are played over and over like a tune we cannot rid from our thoughts.

Our bodies continue to shiver with fever of an immaterial disease and its lingering symptoms, its ravages and confusions. No longer entrapped in the dream, we are not yet fully free from its clutches. And the worst part about occupying this transitional zone, the most awful revelation that occurs

in this state, is not the nightmare that has just slithered into our skull and nested there for awhile. That particular trauma is complete and the house lights are now up around us, even while we remain in a delirium that might otherwise signal some serious mental disorder, some damage to the system that functions to give us a sense that we are a real person, a normal and continuous self. The worst part of this limbo between two worlds is not the memory of the nightmare that has already passed, receding into some slime-streaked and cobwebbed cavern of memory, but the idea of all those nightmares that have yet to come in our lives and are as sure as anything to do so. In those interstitial moments between the deformations of a sick dream and a full recovery that sends our minds home from the hospital, we find the prospect of further episodes of this kind, of relapses into the frenzies of the sleeping mind, to be absolutely intolerable. How could we ever again bring ourselves to take the risk of going back to that bed and descending into dreams. What a monstrous destiny we must helplessly face, each night standing on the precipice of sleep and not knowing what waits below.

However, as previously observed, every move we make in our lives entails risk.

This statement could be truthfully extended to declare not merely risk but, based on facts and figures, the certainty of pain and grief that encompasses us like barbed wire into which, sooner or later, we will run headlong. Few of us vow not to enter an automobile because some of the most grotesque disfigurements and deaths have resulted from this decision. On the other hand, many are dissuaded from knowing the exhilaration offered by riding a motorcycle, whether

or not they have heard that surgeons refer to these vehicles as “donorcycles.”

But even the most incautious among us weigh the risks, gauging what prospective harm they find acceptable in light of the rewards involved. Many believe that they have a fair choice in the matter of which doom ultimately overtakes them, and sometimes their lives indeed come to an end approximately as they envisioned. Of course, this is not exactly how they explain their predicament to themselves. They usually remain as oblivious as humanly possible to any nastiness that could waylay their life-plan. While they may have had a close brush with severe physical damage or their own demise, they usually recover from these experiences and, like those who have had a good share of nightmares in their time, eventually go back to sleep… because it is in their sleep that they are looking to die after a long and healthy life. Neither waking nightmares nor non-waking ones have given the human species any pause in its progress. It is not as if a person, once born, or a society, once formed, has ever had any appealing choice except to carry on as if everything will be all right in the short run and to think about the end of things as little as possible.

Confronting the nightmare on a daily basis and on a conscious level is just not something people are wont to do as a rule. A small number of us, however, have become devout researchers of all types of nightmares and, perhaps due to some fluke or flaw of character, wish to release our findings in the form of what have become casually known as horror stories. The following observations are drawn from my own studies in this area of human experience.

However frightening nightmares may be, plain old horror is not the entirety of their essence, nor is it that of the horror story. Of course, there must be something horrific about them, whether it is being stalked by someone through dark streets or groping your way through an ever-narrowing tunnel or finding yourself receiving a ghostly visitation as mentioned earlier. Yet the quality of a nightmare lies neither in these nor in any other hypothetical horrors as such. What makes a nightmare nightmarish is the sense that something is happening that should not be. While nightmares are the most convenient reference point for this sense of the impossible, the unthinkable, as something that is actually happening, it is not restricted to our sleeping hours.

To give a relatively common example, we might consider the plot of a traffic accident, an event that is commonly experienced as dreamlike in the beginning, as you find yourself suddenly moving along a track of time quite different from the one you knew before the accident began. You may be traveling along slippery roads and then, without warning, find yourself sliding across several lanes of oncoming traffic. You know in principle that such things can easily happen. They may even have happened to you on a prior occasion. You know that they happen to other people all the time. Nevertheless, this accident was not in your plans, which is why it is called an accident. It seems like a mistake, even if it could be explained by a cause-and-effect confluence of circumstances. It was a mistake because you had an idea of how things were supposed to be that day, as you do every day, and spinning helplessly in your car while others try to avoid a collision with you, perhaps unsuccessfully, was not part of your schedule. One moment you had a firm grip on things;

the next moment you are careening toward who knows where. You are not filled with horror, not yet at least, as you spin along the pavement that is slick with rain or snow. At this point, everything is all strangeness. You have been taken to a different place from where you were, and you are no longer in control. Anything could happen now. That is the suspicion that creeps into your thoughts as a nightmare begins. Nothing is safe and nothing is off limits. All of a sudden something was set into motion that changed everything into that which was not meant to be, at least according to your deluded conception of your life and its "meaningful" trajectory. Yet these things happen, as everyone knows. They have always happened and are always happening.

But we isolate the nightmare by calling it imaginary and denying it a place in our real life; we anchor ourselves in a place far away from it, where such "realities" as God and Country rule the wavelengths; we distract ourselves from it by confining our minds to places where it is not; and we sublimate the nightmare by placing it in stories and paintings and other devisings that we may put away at will. If we neglected to do this, we would be living at all times in a world of nightmare... a world that was not meant to be and yet is so. And thus we conspire with ourselves and against ourselves to deny the most obvious facts of the nightmare—death, disease, damage, and derangement. The horror story, by obeying the terms of the nightmare, is a way that, deviously, some people use to think about the unthinkable, to face what we otherwise would not choose to look upon, and, more importantly, to control and give meaning to that which can neither be controlled nor harbors any meaning. It is a perverted mode of defending ourselves from what would de-

mean and destroy us, from what cannot be helped and should never have been—life itself in all its inane grotesquerie. However, for all our efforts to overwrite what has been written, to remake what had been made, to change what cannot be changed, and accept what is unacceptable, we have succeeded only in making a bad situation worse. No matter how many paper monsters we face down, no matter how many nightmares we shake off, the best we can do is open the pages of Poe and recite—with a resigned and sardonic calm, if we can manage it—those words from *The Conqueror Worm* that tell us a story in which there is "much of Madness, and more of Sin And Horror the soul of the plot."

Interviews

This section contains various interviews.

John B. Ford: The Grimscribe In Cyberspace, April, 2000

JBF: Welcome, Mr Ligotti. It's quite dark and cold in here. In fact I've a feeling that we've just stepped into the darkest area of cyberspace that anyone could ever hope to find. It's quite an eerie feeling when you think this meeting of intelligences is going to be frozen here indefinitely, that people will be viewing this interaction of our minds long after we've moved on to focus on other affairs. I suppose it's analogical of leaving footsteps in the sand, though in this case it might be more fitting to say on the dark side of the moon. One thing I've experienced for quite a few years now is a deep-rooted fear of death, and so it fascinates me that your fiction often indicates that you actually crave annihilation. It's as though an extremely complex and talented intelligence wants to be nothing more than a cloud of steam which will shortly evaporate into nothingness. Why does this physical existence of ours cause you to dislike it so much, and don't you believe that there's a spiritual existence once the human body has fallen cold?

> TL: I discovered a long time ago that it's impossible to convince someone that they would be better off not having been born. If they don't see things that way, there's nothing anyone can say to alter their perspective, and it's a fool's game to attempt to do so. As for a postmortem spiritual existence, I guess I would first have to believe that there was such a thing as a spiritual component to the human entity,

which I do not. I can't even conceive of an existence after death that would be any less of a nightmare, and possibly far more of one, than the present-tense, hard time that we're doing now. So why don't I just kill myself now? Anyone who asks a question like that wouldn't understand the answer.

JBF: Authors such as Lovecraft and Hodgson were the first to drive home the message about the sheer indifference of the universe towards mankind. I'd like to know your thoughts as to whether you believe there is one omnipotent intelligence (call it God if you will) behind the universe? I'm sure Lovecraft would have been fascinated by incidents such as Roswell and more recent incidents, do you believe mankind is alone upon this big ball of colour in all the darkness, or do you believe there are other intelligent lifeforms out there?

TL: I think Lovecraft would also have made fine fictional use of the rash of suicide cults in recent decades, not to mention the nightmares of technology. As for the God thing, it seems bizarre to me even to be asked such a question. I know that there are states of mind in which anybody is capable of believing in anything, such as an afterlife or a soul or a god, but I haven't experienced such a state of mind for some time now. Even in those days when I did believe in a god,or at least believed that I believed in one, I never felt that there was anything very real about it. On the subject of intelligent lifeforms existing in other precints of the universe, I just don't care one way or the other. I can't bring myself to feel that

it makes any difference. I remember my youngest brother saying something funny about this subject. He's a big sports fan and as a way of expressing his devotion to football he remarked that if an alien landing were being televised on one channel and Monday Night Football was on another channel, he would watch the football game and tape the alien landing. I think that I'd probably watch the alien landing because I'm not a football fan and there aren't any decent TV shows on Monday. I do remember being disheartened to learn that there might exist some form of organic life below the glacial surface of one of the moons of Jupiter. “There's goes another perfectly good wasteland pure of the agitations of creaturely existence,” I thought to myself in a mood of relative detachment.

JBF: I'd find it interesting to learn the process you employ for writing a short story. My method is to look upon a story as being a series of visions, almost like a film being projected inside my head. I wondered if it was like that for you? Do you take notes and make an outline of the story you are working on, or do you just let it flow from your mind?

TL: Of course to some extent I do see mental images of what I'm writing about, but it's not the kind of “movie in my mind” that I think most fiction writers experience. I prefer still images to moving ones—photographs rather than films. I find it difficult as a reader to “play” a book in my head, which is one of the reason that I never read conventional novels: everything comes out rather vague and blurry — es-

pecially if there's any kind of action being described. I know that many fiction writers strive to make their words transparent, so to speak, in order to give their narratives a heightened illusion of the lifelike. But that just doesn't work for me at all. If there's nothing interesting about the way words are being used, then there's nothing there for me as a reader. I do make notes before I write a story, as well as during the course of composition. But I tend to look at a story more as an essay than a work of fiction. I think of a narrative as a series of propositions marshalled to make a point. I would feel lost if I just let my mind meander through a story, although I know that this approach works very well for a lot of writers. It does seem like it would be a fun way to write.

JBF: How much influence do you think a story has over the human mind while a person is in the act of reading? I know that you look upon someone reading a book as though they are escaping, losing themselves from all the grimness of life for a while, (and I agree) but for that amount of time does the author really have full control over the thoughts a reader has and the emotion they experience? Or does the author's vision lose the true potency needed to do this during the transference to another mind?

TL: Although the experience of reading has been very important to me, I don't think that anything has ever been written that can exercise the kind of power that I think you're talking about. For me reading acts as a sort of a mild recreational drug, a

diversion and not much more. Attempting to read your favorite author when you've got a bad headache or the flu is good way to verify the limits of literature. It's really not much help—just a way for people who are in reasonably good health to pass the time. In other words, I am definitely not a believer in literature as a form of magic or means of personal salvation.

JBF: Over the years I've known quite a few examples of incidents happening that I can't explain. Perhaps I'm talking about the supernatural here, but I don't like to use that word because people tend to immediately think back to the Conan Doyle era, and all the feigned practice of spiritualism which took place during that time. But what would you think if someone told you they genuinely experience things like lightbulbs exploding when they're not switched on, fresh flowers in a vase dying in the space of one night, and things of that nature. Do you think this results from something buried within the human mind itself, or perhaps something external and not yet understood by us? Have you experienced unaccountable 'happenings' yourself?

TL: I once took a class in something called Silva Mind Control. This was back in the early 1970s. The object was to develop your so-called psychic potential. Everybody in the group successfully performed some kind of paranormal feat. I myself diagnosed the illnesses of several people whom I had never met. It was kind of fun and I think I may have been mildly amazed, but it didn't change my life. I know that such experiences can be created by non-

paranormal means, which doesn't necessarily disqualify the validity of the paranormal entirely. I'm sure that very weird and inexplicable things happen all the time. So if somebody told me about exploding lightbulbs and fresh flowers dying in a vase, I would probably take them at their word that these things did in fact happen and move on. These are not weird occurences of a very high order. The world is definitely a strange place, and there are a lot of things about it that are unknown. Everybody knows that. Suppose all of the paranormal and supernatural phenomena that you've ever heard were all proven to be true—alien abductions, ghosts, what have you. Then they wouldn't be paranormal or supernatural anymore—they'd just be more stuff happening in the world. I know that a lot people think that it really makes a big difference whether or not any of these things are real or not, but it really doesn't. You still have to haul you're body around this world until you die. And if you live on after your death, then you'll just be living in another world... and when it comes down to it, one world's pretty much the same as another. Just try to imagine another reality that's anything more than a copy of this one. You can't do it. If you could, it would make for some very interesting weird fiction. But all weird fiction is based on creating a subjective sense of strangeness. It never describes hitherto unimagined orders of being, although it often hints at such things. But that's all it can do is hint.

JBF: It's obvious that much of your fiction has it's roots set deep in your personal nightmare experiences. Are your dreams ever lucid or are you just carried along as a spectator of yourself?

> TL: I had only a few lucid dreams when I was a kid but nothing since then. I had an out-of-body dream some years ago after accidentally drinking two cups of caffeinated coffee before falling asleep. I fell asleep on the couch and my dream body was floating around the living room. Hey, maybe it was an actual out-of-body experience. Coffee as the gate to another world—just like LeFanu's “Green Tea.”

JBF: It's said that within twenty years time we will have the technology to record the dream (or nightmare) experience and play it back to other people. Perhaps this seems farfetched at the moment, but when you think how people are already using mobile phones and computers almost as an extension of their own bodies, then maybe it really isn't. Technology is moving incredibly fast and the public are embracing everything it comes up with. Do you envisage a time when today's dreamers will be tomorrow's internal ‘movie makers’?

> TL: I've never given it a thought. But now that you mention it, I bet a videotape of someone's dream would make more sense that most of the movies being released these days.

JBF: Will people ever be able to access a virtual library of dreams and plug into one as a means of entertainment?

TL: If things ever do reach that point, I'm sure we can expect to have product placements and advertisements inserted among our dreams of flying or being chased by monsters.

JBF: “I've noticed how many horror writers die early and in tragic circumstances. To name just a handful: Schulz, Hodgson, Lovecraft, Poe, Maupassant, Grabinski, etc. It worries me quite a lot because I'm aware I'm producing fiction at least as dark as these people did, I think there *may* be a danger in it. I'm speaking from the point of view that I'm already dosing myself with beta blockers and anti-depressants in order to be able to face life. Do you believe that there is a danger in creating intense horror fiction of this mould, or do you think it is a matter of having to get something out of the system — passing it on to the world and letting them deal with it instead?

TL: (putting the answer to this question on hold for a second) I've never taken beta blockers. Do you find them very effective?

JBF: Yes, they're a drug mostly used to lower blood pressure in people, but they also have the effect of lowering the pulse rate. My heart beats too fast because of the intense anxiety I often suffer, and so I use beta blockers to prevent this. They're very effective, but I can only take them in combination with anti-depressants. If I take them ‘neat’ my stomach is thrown into total chaos.

TL: How do they interact with the AD's?

JBF: They work in harmony in my case, otherwise I think I would have started pushing up flowers in the local church-

yard about four years ago. There must be some ingredient in them to stimulate hunger, and in my case this also reverses the adverse stomach problems caused by the beta blockers.

> TL: I find that tranquilizers and a very low dosage of anti-depressants are the best combination for anxiety-panic disorder. AD's alone are bad news, at least for me. But to respond to the question, I think that any kind of writing is both physically and psychologically harmful, but I don't think writing horror fiction is anymore debilitating than other kinds of writing. No one should write, or perform any kind of intense mental labor, if they can possibly help it. I know that this sounds perverse, but consider that most of what we're driven to do as human beings—especially activities that we consider "fun"—take their toll upon us. Writing invariably leaves me in an incredibly agitated and exhausted state, as well as causing me digestive troubles. There have been occasions when I've wanted to commit some act of violence but instead wrote a horror story fueled by my violent impulses. But afterward I didn't feel any less violent. I've never felt that I've gotten anything out of my system by writing a horror story. If anything, I think writing aggravates the emotion that inspired it in the first place.

JBF: Tell us a little about your latest collaborative project, there's a buzz of excitement going round at the moment because we've all heard that you've written a film script of 'The Last Feast of Harlequin'. I've heard the imagery is even more bizarre than that of the story, is this true?

TL: I hope so. The imagery in “Last Feast of Harlequin” isn't all that bizarre — just the screaming clown face creeps and the crooked-looking town. Plus the worms. But there aren't any worms in the screenplay. That element was to support the thematic material in the story and would look kind of silly in a movie.

JBF: Did you enjoy the experience of working on a film script, or do you prefer to work on your own fiction?

TL: I co-wrote the script with Brandon Trenz, with whom I had previously collaborated on the X-Files episode that was on the TLO website some time back. There's definitely a lot of fun to be had in writing a screenplay with someone else, whereas I never found writing stories much fun. And when collaborating on a screenplay isn't any fun, at least you've got someone else suffering right along with you. But neither of us has been through the whole experience yet... and we may never will get to that point, since we wrote the screenplay on spec, and it remains to be seen whether or not the production company that optioned “The Last Feast of Harlequin” will find the film adaptation a financially and artistically viable project.

JBF: “I know that you greatly admire authors such as: Lovecraft, Schulz, Grabinski, Campbell, and Borges, but I'd be interested to learn your thoughts on other legends of the genre. Chambers’ most potent work ‘The King In Yellow’ is

often compared to your fiction, and so it makes me wonder if any influence actually came from him.

TL: I was never that big a fan of Chambers' "The King in Yellow." I like Lovecraft's description of the book in Supernatural Horror in Literature more than I like the book itself. I absorbed a lot of the 1890s aura that's associated with "The King in Yellow" from reading other authors of that period like Ernest Dowson, Arthur Symons, Aubrey Beardsley, Arthur Machen, and so on.

JBF: Hodgson's 'The House on the Borderland' is possibly the closest anyone's ever come to capturing the nightmare experience in a novel, I wondered if you've ever read that novel and if you agree with me?

TL: I'm really going to have to read that book again, because I could barely make it through the thing the first time I read it. I apologize for seeming so contrary about this, since I know that so many afficianados have such high regard for this novel. I readily admit that my taste as a reader is very screwy and should be dismissed by anyone who disagrees with me.

JBF: Have you read authors such as Shiel, Blackwood, and Machen, and does their work have appeal for you?

TL: I remember admiring Shiel's horror stories very much when I read them over twenty years ago, but the rest of his work doesn't hold any interest for me. I read all of Blackwood's short fiction around the same time and of course appreciated its power and

imagination, although I'm generally put off by the paganist worldview that pervades much his work. I really came to appreciate Blackwood all over again when I read Michael Ashley's selection from his work entitled The Magic Mirror. I actually read Arthur Machen before I read Lovecraft—around 1971—and was first attracted to his fiction because it seemed to me so reminiscent of the Sherlock Holmes stories. Later I came to appreciate Machen's wonderfully vile subject matter and his magic as a prose stylist.

JBF: “I believe you have just had an audio collection called ‘I Have A Plan For The World’ released. Was this another venture featuring David Tibet?

TL: It's a twenty-minute or so CD performed by Current 93, with words by yours truly: twelve short pieces that's on the theme announced by the CD's title

JBF: What are your plans for the future, Mr Ligotti? Will there be another dark treat for us in the shape of a new collection before too long?

TL: I have no idea. I never had any idea. I have no control over that. Sorry.

JBF: Finally, how would you like the world to remember you when the time arrives and the black curtain eventually descends before your eyes?

TL: Eventually descends? I want that black curtain to come down so fast that I won't feel or hear it. “He

never knew what hit him." That's how I want my epitaph to read.

Source: John B. Ford's email magazine *Terror Tales*.

Matt Cardin: Interview With Thomas Ligotti, July, 2006

MC: Thanks so much for agreeing to do this, Tom. Let's start with a passel of questions about your writing habits, since this is an issue that has long fascinated me. You're now well into the third decade of your writing career. I know that for you, writing has always been annoying, agonizing, or both. As you've said several times, you're one of those writers who enjoys having written as opposed to the act of writing itself. More than once you've resolved not to write any more, only to have something come along that called you back to it. What exactly does this involve? What comes over you that lets you know another project is calling? I'm also curious to know if anything about your experience of the writing process has changed over time.

> TL: This is going to be a boring response because I haven't anything writerly to say about this matter. It's all a matter of personal pathology. Writing was not really difficult for me in the late seventies and throughout the eighties. There was a period from 1975 to 1979 when I was severely depressed, in addition to my panic-anxiety disorder. I was anhedonic all day every day. I thought my existence was over. But I was young, and it was during that period that I began to write in earnest. Years went by, and I wrote one bad story after another. Then I wrote “The Last Feast of Harlequin,” whose narrator is a depressive. It was very bad, but not so bad that I destroyed it. I

kept it in an old beer case that I used to archive my writing. Every so often I'd read it over again, thinking how I could extract the good parts from the bad. In the meantime, I began writing stories that were published in small-press magazines. More than ten years after writing “Last Feast,” I was able to rewrite it so that it was no longer terrible. Around that time I was developing a case of Irritable Bowel Syndrome due to stress. If rolling on the floor of emergency rooms in spasms of intestinal agony sounds like fun, then ask your doctor if IBS may be the digestive disorder that's right for you. That condition and my increasing panic-anxiety, along with getting older, really made writing an exercise in agony. It also became the basis for the stories of the “Teatro Grottesco” cycle. I still had other stories that I wanted to write, so I wrote them. But whenever I wrote, I would end up in a state of extreme agitation and my gut would be killing me. In 1991, I decided to call it quits as a writer. But I had to do something. So I started playing guitar again—I played from my teens and into the early seventies—thinking that this would be a less stressful activity. I became a complete guitar geek, and it wasn't any less stressful than writing. This was around 1993 when the company I worked for was going through a reorganization, not its first. I think of 1993-1994 as the time when people working in offices realized their potential for being assholes. That second reorganization disturbed me so much with its blatant idiocies and pod-people mentality that I wrote “The Nightmare

Network." Now I was writing again and playing guitar on top of that. The situation at work kept escalating in its madness and pathos, and I wrote another corporate horror story called "I Have a Special Plan for This World." By then, a number of my coworkers actually felt that I was going off my rocker and feared I would "do something." I didn't feel that I was to that stage yet. It wasn't until 2000, several reorganizations later, that I began to lose it. I became obsessed by violent fantasies. These became the impetus for writing My Work Is Not Yet Done. I tried to give these stories a larger meaning than simply that of revenge, which is usually not a subject worth writing about as such. Then I wrote two more corporate horror stories, "My Case for Retributive Action," and "Our Temporary Supervisor." Labeling these stories as "Tales of Corporate Horror" was my way of organizing a reader's perception of them but, I hope, not limiting them to the realm of working life. "I Have a Special Plan for This World" takes places in a corporate setting, but, like my other corporate horror tales, was intended to convey a broader perspective relating to themes that are important to me: the fiasco and nightmare of existence, the particular fiasco and nightmare of human existence, the sense that people are puppets of powers they cannot comprehend, etc. These themes just naturally come to the fore when I'm experiencing some especially intense or unpleasant episode in my life. Pain is my muse, so to speak. By 2001, my psychological status was that of bipolar depression.

In 2002, my depression let up for a month, and I went into a hypomanic phase. During that time I wrote two more stories, “Purity” and “The Town Manager,” which were based on my enraged reaction to social and political developments in the U.S. at the time. The few things that I've written since were written in hypomanic states, for which I now take medication along with my other meds. So I guess there's an observable pattern in that I write when something in my life pushes me to do so, specifically hatred and hurt. These act as a springboard for the themes of my stories, which I hope transcend my temporary experience and connect with my overall outlook on existence, which may or may not interest the reader but is the essential reason that I write.

MC: Does writing still give you pleasure at all? You've said that when you first started doing it, it made you high like the drugs you used to take, only without their negative effects. Is that still the case? Or is it more of release valve for negative inner pressure these days? Or is it a combination of both?

TL: Writing has always brought me more satisfaction than pleasure. I've always enjoyed the planning stage of a new story more than writing the story itself. That's when the story seems to have unlimited possibilities. I try not to work out the elements too quickly because each idea, character, setting, etc. erodes those possibilities. Due to this effect, I deliberately didn't outline beforehand how the characters in My Work Is Not Yet Done would be done in.

This enabled me to look forward to how each of them would get it and how each method would work with other aspects of the story.

MC: So many modern-day pop fiction authors emphasize the old saw that "story comes first." I think of Stephen King, for example, who has said this many times. Even a lot of literary writers agree with it. "With me," Bernard Malamud once said, "it's story, story, story." I recall once in the past when you were asked about the near absence of plot in some of your stories, you said you had never understood what your readers were talking about when they mentioned this, since you had always thought your stories contained as much plot as anybody else's. Personally, when I think of the many vignettes you've written, and also your more overtly experimental pieces (such as "Notes on the Writing of Horror"), and also such pieces as "Ghost Stories for the Dead," in which you foregrounded the horrific philosophical speculation and presented the actual story or plot in an oblique and almost subliminal fashion—I have to admit that I understand what your many readers have been asking about. And I certainly don't consider this submergence of plot to be a detriment. I think all those writers who offer a one-size-fits-all recommendation based on the "story first" approach are simply making an adage out of their private preference. I think they're probably the type of readers who revel in story, and so when they go to write their own fiction, this is how they approach it. What's your take on all this?

TL: I agree with your analysis. It seems natural to me that people who like to read stories will, if they are writers, like to write stories. For my part, I don't

care for stories that are just stories. I feel there's something missing from them. What's missing for me is the presence of an author or, more precisely, an author's consciousness. In most literary novels, the author is there in the spaces between the characters and the scenery, but I like to see the author out front and the rest in the background. Aside from the stories you mentioned in your question, I believe my own stories to have story galore within them. But these are only pretexts, coat racks on which to hang what's really important to me, which is my own sensibility. That's all I really have to work with. Most writers adore observing other people and the lives they lead, then making up a story about them. They really pay attention to the world around them. This is something I literally can't do. I just don't care about what makes people tick, and, as Sherlock Holmes said, I see but do not observe. It just seems completely trivial and useless to pay attention to these things. I'm no more interested in the physical universe, which sends scientists into raptures of rhetoric but doesn't impress me in the least. I can't fathom why anyone should care about how the universe began, how it works, or how it will end. More triviality and uselessness. At the same time, I'm in awe of writers who are adept at telling stories, just as I'm in awe of people who speak foreign languages or play a musical instrument really well. But that doesn't mean that I want to read their stories or listen to them talk or make music. As Morrissey says in the Smiths' song "Panic": "Because the music that

> they constantly play says nothing to me about my life." The work of writers such as Malamud, William Styron, Saul Bellow, et al. not only says nothing to me about my life, but it says nothing to me about what I've experienced or thought of life broadly speaking. By contrast, writers such as Jorge Luis Borges, H. P. Lovecraft, and Thomas Bernhard say plenty of things about both my life in particular and life in general as I have experienced and thought of it. I can take an interest in the writing of these authors because they seem to have felt and thought as I have. William Burroughs once said that the job of the writer is to reveal to readers what they know but don't know that they know. But you have to be pretty close to knowing it or you won't know it when you see it.

"I couldn't possibly write something that would reflect the true depths of my aversion to everything that exists. Assuming that anything has to exist, my perfect world would be one in which everyone has experienced the annulment of his or her ego. That is, our consciousness of ourselves as unique individuals would entirely disappear. We would still function as beings that needed the basics—food, shelter, and clothing—but life wouldn't be any more than that. It wouldn't need to be." MC: How much conscious effort do you put into the poetic quality of your prose? I'm talking about its prosody—meter and sound and all that. I think I recall Raymond Carver recounting how when he was a student of John Gardner's, Gardner would analyze his prose in painstaking detail, going through it line by line and per-

forming scansion on it like poetry. Do you do anything like that with your own writing? Do you intentionally write and/or revise with an eye (and ear) to creating effects through the artful deployment of language techniques? Or do you just forage around for the right general feeling?

TL: Unless I'm emulating the style of another writer, such as Bruno Schulz or Thomas Bernhard, I follow a tone of voice that I have in my head. This supplies the rhythm and pace I want, the music of the story, and makes the narrative accommodating to any poetic devices I might want to use, principally metaphor. I can't imagine scanning another writer's prose. But Gardner was a scholar of Middle English literature, so his guidance as writing teacher was probably useful to Carver, who wrote short in a sort of blank verse style. The trouble in being too preoccupied with how your work sounds in English is that this has little bearing on how it'll sound in translation. This is going to sound monumentally egotistical, but at an early stage in my writing I became conscious of using wordplay that I knew wouldn't translate well into another language. That came out of my obsession with the works of Vladimir Nabokov. So I stopped doing too much of that, which is difficult because wordplay comes fairly natural to me. And the problem with wordplay that's too abstruse is this: if a reader doesn't get it, then it was a waste of time to do it in the first place; if a reader does get it, it's not really that much to get. I've analyzed the double entendres and multilingual puns in several of Nabokov's books. That's not

what's of most interest about him as a writer. What is interesting is his idiosyncratic persona and his obsession with death, harm, loss, and all those bad things which are at the core of literature in general but which, for a major big shot writer of the modern era, are especially pronounced in Nabokov.

MC: I recall from prior interviews that your earliest introduction to horror fiction came through Shirley Jackson, Edgar Allan Poe, Arthur Machen, and H.P. Lovecraft. Do you think any of these initial reading experiences strongly affected the type of fiction you wanted to write? I'm not talking so much about content as authorial approach. I know your breakdown at age 17 provided the emotional and philosophical foundation for all of your writing. But in tandem with the question about plot and story above, I'm wondering if you think your stylistic approach was in part determined by your experiences as a reader, or if it was less a matter of determination and more a matter of confirmation.

TL: Shirley Jackson shouldn't be included in this group. I read The Haunting of Hill House because I had seen and liked the movie and, in those days without video, couldn't see it whenever I wanted. So I read the novel when I came across it by chance and was stuck somewhere without anything else to do. It didn't make me want to write about similar subject matter or in the style of Shirley Jackson, but it did make me want to read other works of horror fiction, even though at the time I didn't know if there were any or what they were like. Practically the only fiction I had read at that time was the Sherlock Holmes

stories. I enjoyed those quite a bit because I identified with the neurosis of Holmes, as well as his use of drugs. The next horror writer I read was Arthur Machen, who wrote very much about the same milieu as the Holmes stories: foggy London streets and creepy countryside settings. Then I read Poe and Lovecraft for the first time and found what I didn't know I was looking for: writers who put themselves on every page of their work, who wrote like personal essayists and lyric poets. Every fiction writer I've ever admired wrote in this manner. I say "wrote," in the past tense, because they're all dead now. Any other type of fiction writer doesn't exist for me.

MC: Have you ever gotten stuck while writing a story? As in, you didn't know your way ahead?

TL: No, I've never gotten stuck. I've always had to know enough about the story I'm going to write and be enthusiastic about it to make it worth the bother to write the thing in the first place. So I meditate on it, make tons of notes, ask myself if there is something missing from the story that should be there or something that's there and shouldn't be, and rack my brain to take the idea of the story to the farthest limit it will allow. Satisfied that the story will be worth writing, I start writing it. In the process, I usually come up with better ideas than I had originally planned. If that didn't happen, the story would only be adequate, as a number of my stories have been. It's not possible to plan every metaphor and

structural aspect ahead of time, of course. I've had to trust that my abilities in these areas won't let me down.

MC: That leads me to a separate but related question: Have you ever suffered from writer's block? I mean as a condition distinct from simply being stuck in the middle of a story. The best description of what I'm talking about comes from poet Thom Gunn: “There are certain times when you are absolutely sterile, that is, when words seem to mean nothing. The words are there, the things in the world are there, you are interested in things in the same way and theoretically you can think up subjects for poems, but you simply can't write. You can sit down at your notebook with a good idea for a poem and nothing will come. It's as though there is a kind of light missing from the world. It's a wordless world, and it's somehow an empty and rather sterile world. I don't know what causes this, but it's very painful.” When I first encountered these words they gave me a literal shiver, because they describe an experience that has hounded me for years. It feels distinctly different from the so-called “fallow period” in the creative process. It's more like inner death. I was amazed when you told one interviewer that you had never experienced writer's block, because I would have thought your painful subjective life, and especially yours bouts with anhedonia, would have elicited this experience many times. Or am I using the term in a different sense than you meant when you gave that answer?

TL: Whenever I've wanted to write something, I've always been able to write it. The problem for me is not being unable to write, but not caring at all about

writing ... or anything else. In a state of anhedonia, everything is revealed in its true purposelessness and inanity. You can argue with my use of “true” in the last sentence. But you'd also have to argue with spiritual traditions such as Buddhism, which have no use for anything, let alone short stories. Buddhism isn't my point of departure, but I'm in a similar place. I'm completely detached from anything, including myself and anyone around me. Doing anything just seems plain stupid, which in my opinion it ultimately is. This is the lesson of anhedonia, which is an eminently rational state. But if you're going to do anything, you must be in an irrational state of emotion, and without this irrationality your life is just numbers: how long, how much, how many, how far. Emotion gives an illusory focus and meaning to our lives. When the feeling is gone, so is that sense. This sense is a motivator yet it also fools you into thinking that something is important when it's not in the least important, except as an engine for your meaningless life. But I don't feel that anhedonia is “painful” in the way that Thom Gunn is saying that writer's block is painful. That is, I'm not agonized that I want to write and can't. Also known as “melancholic depression,” anhedonia is painful, but that pain has nothing to do with not being able to respond emotionally to anything. The anhedonic can't even conceive of wanting to have his emotions back. That, too, seems stupid and empty and useless. All you want is for the hurt to stop. But even suicide seems pointless. One would

> have to become emotionally energized past the anhedonia in order to conceive of suicide as a solution. I know that all of this is not possible for non-anhedonics to understand. I could say that it's like being emotionally blind, deaf, dumb, mute, and totally paralyzed, but such similes aren't effective unless you've gone through the experience yourself. But as bad as anhedonia may be, it's a cakewalk compared to panic-anxiety disorder. Okay, enough bellyaching about my disorders. Everybody's got their own shit to deal with.

MC: Then let's veer away towards some other types of questions, although not before I enter my opinion that you've done a great job of talking about panic-anxiety disorder in your fiction, which delivers a potent dose of the horrific sense of reality that characterizes the condition. I'll also add that I know what I'm talking about from the way my personal experiences of such states have locked hands with the warped world of your stories. But moving on: For well over a year now you've been laboring on your nonfiction philosophical magnum opus, The Conspiracy against the Human Race. I recall that when some of your ideas from that one made their way into the excellent interview that Neddal Ayad conducted with you for Fantastic Metropolis last year, you were criticized by a couple of people at online venues for what they took to be your overinflation of your personal opinions into blanket judgments of value. Specifically, I remember somebody taking you to task for comparing Lovecraft to Shakespeare and evidently judging Lovecraft the greater of the two when you said that “for Lovecraft, un-

like Shakespeare, the revelation of life as an idiot's tale is the alpha and omega of his work. He doesn't just pay passing lip service to what is the most profound and obvious fact of life —he makes it the core of his work." You have also told me that at least one acquaintance of yours who read an early draft of The Conspiracy against the Human Race simply couldn't get a handle on the fact that in its dark and despairing diagnosis of life, you're talking about the way the world seems, and has to seem, to you as a specific individual, as opposed to advancing its outlook as objective truth. Would you care to say anything about all this, maybe to try and set the record straight?

> TL: Well, I never said that Lovecraft was better writer than "honey-tongued Shakespeare," as one contemporary described him. But Shakespeare was a playwright. Today he would be the kind of novelist whose work I've described in response to an earlier question. His characters say things that appeal to me, and they say it well, but that's not Shakespeare talking. Hamlet's gloomy ramblings were cribbed by Magpie of Avon from Girolamo Cardano's De Consolatione, which has since come to be known as "Hamlet's Book." So I don't know who Shakespeare was, and I can't tell from his works. One can form a good idea of who Lovecraft was from his fiction alone, and I definitely feel closer to him than to Shakespeare. This is something that doesn't matter to most readers, who just want to escape to someplace outside their world and yet at the same time want that other world to be in a significant way like their own, that is, where things happen that they

can understand. Shakespeare didn't write anything that even the dullest imagination can't understand. It's all soap operas and romantic comedies, just the kind of thing that people enjoy today. Lovecraft doesn't write for the same audience. He wrote for the sensitive few rather than the happy many. As for my Unabomber-style essay The Conspiracy against the Human Race, this is by no means a philosophical work, let alone a magnum opus. It's a synthesis of ideas I've formed over my life and of other people's ideas that rhyme with mine. The disconnect that anyone may perceive in this work between what I think and the way I've articulated it is something they can know nothing about. To me, there is no disconnection. I couldn't possibly write something that would reflect the true depths of my aversion to everything that exists. As far as putting words into other people's mouths, as if what seems true to me is what is really true, this is just a commonly used device in writing personal essays. Everyone preaches to the converted. If I didn't believe my thoughts were superior to and truer than the thoughts of people who disagree with me, then I would think something else. And I would think that was superior and truer. Even some scientists who can be almost conclusively demonstrated to be wrong still cling to their erroneous views. This is one of the running themes of The Conspiracy against the Human Race. Truth works within a very tiny, often self-reflexive framework. Three of a kind always beats two pair. Someone believes God exists

because a book tells them he does; they believe the book is true because lots of people have told them that it's the word of God. Plus they like what the book says—that's the most important thing. If they didn't like it, they wouldn't believe it. I think that's the problem I'm encountering in responses to TCATHR. Its readers not only haven't liked what it says, they also don't like that someone they know and to whom they feel otherwise well-disposed could write such a book. It's disturbing, as if you found out your best friend was a serial killer who liked to eat the brains of toddlers. The essay is essentially about how humans can't handle unpleasant realities and what those realities are. But we're predisposed not to think about those things in a way that will affect how we live, or to think about them at all in most cases. I know that's exactly how I am myself. If I weren't, I would be in worse shape than I already am. I certainly wouldn't be doing this interview. I wouldn't even have written TCATHR. If someone says that I'm stupid and wrong, then there's nothing I can say in response except maybe, "Am not." It's really a pain in the ass living in a world of people, including myself, who can't just stop thinking.

MC: Then perhaps even lighter fare, relatively speaking, is in order. Word recently came down the pipeline about a planned series of comic books based on The Nightmare Factory. This was quite a pleasant surprise. Can you reveal any details?

TL: No, I can't. I know only what everyone knows from reading the publicity releases. Fox Atomic, the movie studio that's doing these comics in conjunction with Harper-Collins, doesn't have to consult me about any products they create that are derived from the stories they optioned in The Nightmare Factory.

MC: Even as we speak, the short film adaptation of your story "The Frolic" has entered postproduction. You're reportedly very happy with what you've seen of it so far. Can you tell us anything more?

TL: The latest word is from the producer of "The Frolic," Jane Kosek, is that she contacted the head guy at Fox Atomic, and he wants to see the short film as well as an outline for a feature film from Brandon Trenz and me. We did an outline in April 2005, so that's not a problem. The short should be ready in a month or so.

MC: Can you share any new information about the development status of the screenplays for Crampton and The Last Feast of Harlequin?

TL: They were sent out to a lot of production companies by a talent agent, the same one who made the deal for me with Fox Atomic. Some of the companies showed an interest, and Brandon Trenz went to Hollywood. But nothing came of those meetings as far as the two screenplays you mention. They are officially dead.

MC: And that news officially sucks. What a disappointment. Well, then, what about your current writing projects?

Do you have anything underway besides TCATHR? And when can we expect to see that one published?

> TL: I have no idea when or if TCATHR will be published.

MC: What books and authors are you reading at present, if anything? Awhile back you said you were probably pretty much done with reading, since you had read most of what interested you. How does this stand currently?

> TL: These days I read only nonfiction, if I read anything at all. I recently reread all of E. M. Cioran's works. That took a while. I've read a number of works relating to consciousness studies and, of course, mental illness. Those are very technical and hard on the brain, so I often search out video or audio lectures or interviews by the authors of these works on the Web. In the past year I read On Suicide: A Discourse on Voluntary Death by Jean Améry and Persuasion and Rhetoric by Carlo Michelstaedter. Both of these authors killed themselves, but their books would still be interesting if they hadn't. I still read works by and about Buddhists.

MC: I find your move toward nonfiction to be fascinating for personal reasons, since I moved in that direction myself a few years ago. But it wasn't voluntary. I simply began to notice that I was unable to read fiction a great deal of the time. It was as if some force within me were operating a valve and periodically shutting off my responsiveness to fiction. I encountered a mental fog, a kind of affective and even cognit-

ive blankness, when I tried to make sense of fiction or respond to it in any way. It just seemed meaningless to me. Does this ring a bell with you?

> TL: It sure does ring a bell, a tolling bell. I can no longer emotionally respond to fiction or poetry. That's the reason I read nonfiction, and very cerebral nonfiction at that. One doesn't need to respond emotionally to that kind of writing, which is just for the brain and not the emotions or imagination. Strangely, I find that my experience is the same with movies and TV shows. These don't seem to require emotion or imagination on the viewers' part to be diverting. The anhedonic thing could change in a second, literally, and I wouldn't remember the lesson I learned from it. It has let up several times over the past five years. At these times, as I previously mentioned, I go into hypomanic states in which I want to do all kinds of things and have the impetus to do them. But for me these last only a matter of weeks or maybe a month. When these periods are over, however, the depression comes back worse than ever. I take a drug called Lamictal, which is an anti-convulsant that psychiatrist have using instead of lithium on bipolar disorders and treatment-resistant depression. The way this drug works, ideally, is to put a floor on how bad you can feel and a ceiling on how good you can feel. That's the zone I'm now in. The only reason I'm going into detail about any of this is on the chance that someone reading it will know what I'm talking about and perhaps take an interest in it. My apologies to the rest of you.

MC: What about movies? Have you loved any lately? Or hated any?

TL: Some notable movies that I've recently hated have been Spielberg's Munich and Woody Allen's Match Point. Also, Mission Impossible III. To that list you can add the French film Caché, which is the worst movie I've ever seen. I haven't seen Lady in the Water, but I know it sucks because the writer-director is just no good: his best effort, The Sixth Sense, was a cheat from start to finish. Plus there was that scene in which the mother leaves the kitchen where the kid is eating breakfast and returns a few seconds later to find all the cupboards and drawers are open. For some reason, she just takes this in stride, and it doesn't come up again in the story. Usually the movies I like are trashed or ignored, like Man on Fire with Denzel Washington and Don't Say a Word with Michael Douglas. Lately, I've just been renting or taking out of the library movies I've seen a dozen times. Horror movies: Wolf Creek, sucked; Hostel, sucked; The Devil's Rejects, very funny and clever; remake of The Hills Have Eyes, sucked. This may sound stupid to some horror movie aficionados, but I really thought well of the two Final Destination movies. I rented the third installment, which was done by same ex-X-File guys Morgan and Wong who did the first FD. It sucked. I like movies in which everyone is living a doomed existence, which is why I find George Romero's zombie movies so appealing. From the very beginning of the Dead trilogy, everything is hopeless.

“I'm completely detached from anything, including myself and anyone around me. Doing anything just seems plain stupid, which in my opinion it ultimately is. This is the lesson of anhedonia, which is an eminently rational state.” MC: How about music? Are you listening to any lately? Awhile back you told me you were encountering some of the best music in the most unlikely places, such as television commercials. Is this still happening?

> TL: The reason I hear the best music on television is that I don't listen to music anywhere else, just as I'm not reading fiction or poetry. So music in TV commercials, programs, and movies is all I hear. The exception is the music sent to me by certain people who have recorded their own compositions. I feel that I can still judge whether or not a piece of music is good, even if I don't go spasmodic over it. Presently, I like the theme songs of Cold Case and The 4400, even though the latter show blows. It had promise in the first season, very much like The X-Files, but then it turned into a soap opera.

MC: Speaking of The X-Files, I think life in America and the West is pervaded by an apocalyptic feeling right now. How about you?

> TL: At the moment, I'm not very emotionally responsive to anything. My medications only add to that non-responsiveness. In the last session I had with my psychiatrist, he started to talk about the situation in the Middle East heating up toward something apocalyptic. In the past, I would have had something to say on this subject, because what I

talk about with my psychiatrist is mostly politics and movies. However, this time I had to say that I just wasn't interested in what was going on in the world. I can't feel anything for what's happening now. About three years ago, I was completely enraged by the whole American scene. I'd go out of my way to watch people like Ann Coulter, listen to Rush Limbaugh, and aggravate myself over the evangelical brood. A lot of that is in TCATHR. I might get exercised about this stuff in the future, but it doesn't penetrate me at the moment. Maybe if somebody nuked someone I'd watch the news stories about it. Short of that, or another 9/11, I don't find current events very diverting. Also, I've had a sense of personal apocalypse for decades due to my psych disorders. I've thought that I was dying literally thousands of times during my panic attacks. The end of the line for me has felt imminent for so long that the real-world version of it would just be another occasion of "Oh, lordy, what's going to become of us." Anyway, all apocalyptic phenomena take place on a personal level. It just seems scarier when it's on a larger scale.

MC: I know you're familiar with Hubbert's Peak and the theory of peak oil. It's an issue that I'm following closely myself. Do you have any thoughts about it?

TL: Yes. I would like to see a total depletion of oil occur as soon as possible ... just for fun. This might be the best thing that could happen to this world, socially and politically speaking. Of course, it could

also be the worst. In either case, I am slightly interested in which way it would go. It might go the latter way for a while and then change course. The whole oil thing brings to mind two of my favorite movies in which the fight for natural resources plays a role: The Formula with Marlon Brando and George C. Scott and Three Days of the Condor with Robert Redford and Faye Dunaway. Ultimately, I don't have any investment in the future, so I can't get too het up about what's going to happen after I die.

MC: Let's close this out with another question of global scope. What would a perfect world be like for you? That's of course assuming that you and a world would have to exist at all. You've made it perfectly clear in numerous stories and interviews that you're a fundamental pessimist who thinks it a crying shame that there's something instead of nothing. But given the (supposed) necessity of existence, what would be the best life and the best world for you personally, if you had absolute freedom of choice?

TL: Assuming that anything has to exist, my perfect world would be one in which everyone has experienced the annulment of his or her ego. That is, our consciousness of ourselves as unique individuals would entirely disappear. We would still function as beings that needed the basics—food, shelter, and clothing—but life wouldn't be any more than that. It wouldn't need to be. We would be content just to exist. There's only one problem in this world: none are content with what they have. We always want something else, something “more.” And then when we

get it, we still want something else and something more. There is no place of satisfaction for us. We die with regrets for what we never did and will never have a chance to do. We die with regrets for what we never got and will never get. The perfect manner of existence that I'm imagining would be different than that of most mammals, who feed on one another and suffer fear due to this arrangement, much of it coming at the hands of human beings. We would naturally still have to feed, but we probably would not be the omnivorous gourmands and gourmets that we presently are. Of course, like any animal we would suffer from pain in one form or another—that's the essence of existence—but there wouldn't be any reason to take it personally, something that escalates natural pain to the level of nightmare. I know that this kind of world would seem terribly empty to most people—no competition, no art, no entertainment of any kind because both art and entertainment are based on conflict between people, and in my world that kind of conflict wouldn't exist. There would be no ego-boosting activities such as those which derive from working and acquiring more money than you need, no scientific activity because we wouldn't be driven to improve the world or possess information unnecessary to living, no religious beliefs because those emerge from desperations and illusions from which we would no longer suffer, no relationships because those are based on difference and in the perfect world we'd all be the same person, as well as being

integrated into the natural world. Everything we did would be for practical purposes in order to satisfy our natural needs. We wouldn't be enlightened beings or sages because those ways of being are predicated on the existence of people who live at a lower epistemological stratum.

MC: What you're saying reminds me of some things I've read in the writings of Schopenhauer, U.G. Krishnamurti, and a few others—all of them authors I know you've read. I'm also strongly reminded of Ramesh Baksekar's "euphoric nihilism," as an interviewer for What Is Enlightenment? magazine described it, which envisions the perfect world as one populated by "body/mind organisms" that act in a completely preprogrammed manner with no hint of free will, no trace of any "doers" in the form of self-conscious "I's." The interviewer referred to Balsekar's imagined utopia as "planet advaita."

TL: I looked at Balsekar's Official Web Site. He seems like the perfect example of what U. G. would consider a spiritual huckster. His whole operation seems to be a real racket, and not a particularly distinguished one. Then again, I'm given to snap judgments, and perhaps I'm being unfair in this instance. But I doubt it, especially since he was featured in Andrew Cohen's What Is Enlightenment? and from what I've read, Cohen is the worst guru of all time. Anyway, the phrase "euphoric nihilism" reminds of an electronic book that I downloaded called Conscious Robots, which expostulates very much the same idea. My own perfect world comes

from an amalgam of sources, including Skepticism, Nihilism, Buddhism, and accounts of persons who have actually experienced ego-death, including U. G., as you pointed out. Not many people are interested in living in this world, so there is little motivation to work towards it. As much as we complain about life, we're pretty much satisfied, or think we are, with the ways things are from here to eternity. To me, this is definitive proof that human beings don't deserve to live in a perfect world. Even in fables wherein people lived in a paradise that is supposedly without ego or unnatural desires—Adam and Eve, Pandora—someone always does something to fuck things up so that the world can become the one we already know and, in our depraved way, love.

MC: Thanks again for taking the time to answer some questions, Tom. It's been a pleasure.

TL: Same here, Matt.

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Geoffrey H. Goodwin: A Conversation With Thomas Ligotti, 7th October, 2007

What led to your writing The Conspiracy Against the Human Race?

I could recite a litany of reasons for my writing The Conspiracy Against the Human Race, but the most immediate cause was my reading an essay written in 1933 called “The Last Messiah” by the Norwegian philosopher Peter Wessel Zapffe. Down the ages, pessimistic writers and thinkers have wailed that our lives are predominantly characterized by meaningless suffering and therefore everyone would be better off not to have been born. This is sometimes referred to as a hedonist view of existence, and for one reason or another practically no one is persuaded that there's anything to it. Even if someone grants that life is mostly, or even entirely, a trail of tears with nothing but death at the end, they still don't feel that being alive is not worth it. They'll carry on till the end and pass on this legacy to another generation, perhaps thinking that somehow things will get better.

My own long-held view was that even if suffering as we ordinarily conceive it could be wholly eliminated, there would still be a differential among the

pleasures in our lives. The consequence of this would be that some pleasures would be greater than others, and the lesser pleasures would then come to be felt as suffering. You could also turn this around and say that in a world of all-pervasive but variegated suffering, some ways of suffering would be felt to be worse than others, making the lesser sufferings perceptible as pleasures. One solution to this state of affairs seemed to be the achievement of a steady state of non-suffering. Of course, the problem is that to attain a tolerable middle ground between pleasure and suffering isn't possible without the experience of pleasure on the one side and suffering on the other. This is assuming that we could live under laboratory conditions in which pleasure and suffering, or degrees of pleasure and suffering, could be controlled by some means presently unknown, unworkable, or underdeveloped. That would be a fantastical scenario, of course.

Other solutions that occurred to me were also more or less fantastic or futuristic. Among them was a psychophysical apparatus that could be implanted in us so that we could live much as we do now, except that whenever a certain level of suffering was reached, a combination of mood elevators and, if necessary, painkilling drugs would be released into our system in proportion to our suffering. These agents could also be regulated to work disproportionately as we approached death, thus assuring us that we would leave this world in a state of ecstasy. No one

would ever have to witness the agony of a loved one dying from natural causes or imagine the horror of someone close to them who has died from gruesome accidental causes, since they would comforted by the knowledge of an anti-suffering apparatus functioning in the moribund or traumatized individual as well as having their anxiety assuaged by their own anti-suffering mechanisms. Now, the methods outlined here are just extensions of present-day strategies for bettering our lives, and those of future generations, and operate on the premise that suffering has negligible value or none at all. They're also based on the same hedonist philosophy that, taken to sufficient lengths, is the basis for pessimism.

But hedonism as a life-philosophy isn't limited to pessimists. All spiritual beliefs and practices originate in hedonist values and they're not condemned as pessimistic. What could be more hedonistic than to be addicted to the idea of heaven or Nirvana? Belief in an afterlife is a great Plan B if things don't work out so well for you in this one. And why even believe in a blissful afterlife, or in the salvation of total oblivion if you happen to be a Buddhist, unless you're already committed to the view that this life is pretty lousy? Nevertheless, this isn't how religionists consciously look upon human existence, at least most of the time. As far as atheists are concerned, they just have to hope for the best for themselves and for those who mean anything to them. This is the substance of what I would call “functional optimism” —

the idea that on the whole things aren't so bad and won't ever become so bad that everyone would be better off not having been born. And it's impossible to effectively oppose that way of thinking. It really doesn't work to tell someone who's already alive that it's better not to have been born. They've already been born. It's too late for them. So they make the best of things. They try to accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative. Even pessimists for the most part follow this course. It would be suicide not to, and committing suicide is really hard to pull off in cold blood. Almost no one kills themselves because they think nonexistence is preferable to existence, or because they want to avoid any extraordinary psychological or physical suffering that may be awaiting them. Suicides wait until things are so awful that they can't stand being alive anymore. Sometimes they'll kill themselves when it looks like things are going to become really awful in the near future, but there are a lot of pressures against being a proactive suicide. And when it comes around to facing the facts, almost everyone is afraid of death, so they do what they can to hang on as long as they can. They choose the path that they perceive to lead to the lesser of two horrors and keep following it until they keel over dead. And no hedonistic philosophy is going to convince them or anyone else that this isn't the way to go.

Zapffe was the first pessimistic philosopher to my knowledge who actually came up with a non-hedon-

ist reason for why it would be better not to have been born and not to give birth to others. His observation was that human consciousness, an evolved trait of our species, turned our existence into an untenable paradox. According to Zapffe, it's one thing to experience suffering and then die. But it's quite another thing to be acutely conscious that this is our life — to be aware that we suffer for no good reason and have only a decline into death, or death by trauma, to look forward to. In order to cope with our consciousness of these realities, then, we must smother our consciousness as best we can by using various tactics. The result is a whole species of beings that have to lie unceasingly to themselves, not always successfully, about what they are and what their lives are really like. If we didn't so this, the rug would be pulled out from under us and we'd have to face up to the fact that we're a race that can't come to terms with its existence. Thus we devise ways to mute, distract, and otherwise obfuscate our consciousness so that it doesn't overwhelm us with what we're up against in being alive. This line of thought goes beyond hedonism by exposing us as creatures who bullshit themselves a mile a minute in order to keep going. This bullshit takes various forms. Primary among them are simply ignoring that there is anything problematic about our existence, indulging in pleasurable distractions, creating bogus structures of meaning such as a pleasant afterlife in which the books will be balanced for the suffering we endure in this life, and transmuting

our suffering into works of art and philosophy wherein we distance ourselves from what real suffering is and in the process reform it into a source of amusement. Even pessimists who believe they have gone the distance of realizing that we lead lives of meaningless suffering are caught up in this game and must brutalize their consciousness into submission or feel the full force of the reality that all our so-called pleasures are based on lies. The only solution to this conundrum, as Zapffe saw it, would be to bring an end to this festival of falsehoods by ceasing to reproduce.

Now, every reading of human life is subject to alternate or contrary readings, and so is Zapffe's. But his reading captivated me, because I was already predisposed to believe that life was at best worthless and at worst an intolerable nightmare. In essence, Zapffe's philosophy became another source of bullshit that kept me going so that I could articulate the many aspects of my own grievances against being alive and, I hope, extend or give a greater rhetorical force to what Zapffe had written in “The Last Messiah.” I might add that the title character of this essay appears at the end, tells everyone to stop being fruitful and multiplying, and then is murdered for his trouble. Given Zapffe's reading of the way we are, no other conclusion except utter hopelessness that we will ever change our ways is possible. We're positively doomed to live and wallow in our own bullshit until we become extinct as a species by one

of the many means that have led to the extinction of almost every other species on this planet.

When did you first read Peter Wessel Zapffe's essay, “The Last Messiah?”

I read it not long after it was published in the March/April 2004 issue of the British journal Philosophy Now. Later that year I began work on The Conspiracy Against the Human Race.

Does this mean that Zappfe's work was a confirmation of things that you already knew or were aware of?

I hadn't conceived of the paradox that Zapffe explained had been incited by the development of consciousness in the human species. Nevertheless, I did feel that being conscious was not a good thing. In my story “Dr. Voke and Mr. Veech,” there's a dummy who suffers for having been awakened into awareness. I just thought of consciousness as a source of suffering rather than as a faculty that made all human existence into a tissue of lies, which was Zapffe's idea. While it's not invulnerable to argument — as is no concept in philosophy — this idea provided me with a basis for my generic pessimism, which, as I've already said, is not conceptually defensible. I could rant on a daily basis that, as Lovecraft wrote in one of his stories, “life is a hideous thing.” But anyone could come along and say, “What are you talking about? Everything is beautiful. I'm having the time of my life being alive.” There's no reply to that. You can just say, “Well, if everything is

beautiful, even on every other day, then you're just not paying attention." But Zapffe's reply was that not only is everything not beautiful, no one actually believes it's beautiful even if they say they do. All of our actions bear witness to this observation. In a single essay, which was later expanded as a treatise titled On the Tragic, Zapffe beat the stuffing out of the theory on which Arthur Schopenhauer expatiated for thousands of pages — that everything in the universe is activated by a "Will-to-live," a transcendental force that works the world like a cosmic puppet show. Schopenhauer's Will does have its appeal, because if you accept it, then everything that once seemed mysterious makes perfect sense. If you ever wondered why things are the way they are or why people do the things the things they do, it all goes back to the Will, which is pulling all the strings. Intellectually and emotionally, it's very satisfying. The problem is that Schopenhauer's system only works on paper and can't be detected as being part of existence any more than a creator-God.

Zapffe's thought is very down to earth. You can experience how being conscious ruins human life by taking it out of nature, where the imperative of every living thing is simply to survive and reproduce. Human beings, on the other hand, can ask themselves what they are, why they're alive, what happens after death, and so on. Since there aren't any credible answers to these questions, we make up answers for the purpose of shutting down our con-

sciousness as much as possible. At the same time, we busy ourselves with all sorts of projects and playthings just to wile away our time, also for the purpose of repressing our consciousness as creatures who know they're alive and know they're going to die. At any rate, the whole endeavor of being human is reduced to trying not to be human, which is very messed up. This allows Zapffe to go all the way and make the pessimist's signature pronouncement — that instead of continuing to carry on, we should be getting down to giving up on life. Naturally, this line of thought will not sway anyone who thinks that everything is beautiful, or that anything is beautiful, but it does takes pessimism another step forward, which is admittedly something that concerns only other pessimists.

Before reading Zapffe, I too was aware of my life as a series of distractions and denials that staved off thoughts of the terrible things that could happen to me and of my impending death. I was also sensitive, probably overly so, that these terrible things could happen and in fact were happening everywhere in the world. They had always been happening and, barring some radical change in material existence, would continue to happen until doomsday. I knew that I needed something to take my mind off these things and discover some immediate pretext for being alive. I also knew that I was just biding my time until something terrible came along and I snuffed it, something that would probably happen only after I

had to watch those to whom I had become attached in one way or another had snuffed it. One of those terrible things, among others, that actually did come along in my life was major depression. This is sometimes called the common cold of mental diseases, but that's not how it feels to those who suffer from it. Aside from its other effects, depression has a philosophical effect to it that other kinds of pain do not, and its implications very much changed my sense of what it was like to be alive in the world. In depression, everything is just what it seems to be: a tree is just a tree and not something that arouses symbolic meanings or affective associations. Life itself becomes very transparent in all its aspects to a depressive. There aren't any mysteries left, since all mysteries come from within us. We're mystery-making machines, and we project a sense of mystery onto a world that has no such thing behind or within it. Certain questions remain that may one day be answered or may not be answered. Either way it doesn't matter to a depressive.

Recent movements such as transhumanism and abolitionism project a future in which suffering will be transcended with drugs and technology. There's a guy named David Pearce who runs a Web site called The Hedonistic Imperative, and he very articulately insists that the only worthy goal in human life is that of feeling good all the time. Of course, this is the goal that everyone is concerned with in their lives, but Pearce argues that this could be more ef-

fectively and speedily attained by entirely artificial means. The fact that these people are obsessed with making a serious attempt to abolish human suffering, and to establish this aim as the central project of their lives, is nice to see. Thus far in human history, people have put their effort into curing diseases that make us dysfunctional and unproductive or that are obstacles to increasing our longevity. There hasn't been much interest in confronting human suffering as such. Paradoxically, should the efforts of those who want to annihilate suffering succeed, it could be the end of us as a species. We would be returned to paradise. And reproduction would be irrelevant in a paradisal landscape where all dreams have been satisfied and all fears quashed.

You're best known for writing horror stories and poems. Did The Conspiracy Against the Human Race feel like a different endeavor, even though it was an obvious continuation of certain themes in your work?

Writing Conspiracy was different from writing horror stories in the following way. For me, a story usually has its inception in something irrational — a dream, an image, a phrase that doesn't make any sense. This irrational germ for a story will be something that I feel is dense with meaning and possibilities, even if I know it's going to end up as a horror story. Then some element of the story pokes its head out — a character, a setting, a particular scene in the narrative — and everything comes together very quickly. I'm definitely a didactic writer in that my

stories can be reduced to some point that I'm trying to get across, something that emerges in the course of elaborating its narrative elements. I may start a story in the irrational, but unlike a lot of writers I'm not content to let a story be its own meaning. I have to move from the irrational to the rational. With Conspiracy, I started in the rational and stayed there. It was kind of like working in two dimensions instead of three. All the force of Conspiracy had to come from concepts and rhetoric, both of which are prominent in my stories. But the imaginative landscape was missing. There wasn't a sense of being in a world inside of my head as I wrote. It was more like writing a poem, which for me is an elaboration of an idea. I may start a poem with a single line that fits somewhere into the poem, but that line will make sense conceptually. So writing Conspiracy was like writing a very long poem.

What do you think readers will make of it?

I can only say with any degree of confidence what one faction of readers will make of it. Those are people who have read my horror stories and enjoyed them not in spite of their bleak quality but because of it. An analogy could be drawn with fans of Lovecraft's stories, who read them for their charming regionalism, their mythology of monsters, or for their unusually literate nature — something prized by readers who are generally well read yet still have a weakness for the horror genre — or some combination of these and other characteristics of his work.

But they don't read them as expressions of Lovecraft's vision of human beings as bits of inconsequential organic material quivering in a black infinity that occasionally throws some phenomenon our way that is completely alien to the settled structures of our existence, as if to say: “You can just forget everything you thought you knew about yourselves and everything else in the universe. You know nothing. You are nothing. And the choices you have for dealing with this reality are to go insane or kill yourselves. How about them apples?” This can be a rather consoling vision to those readers who already think as much and are grateful that someone else out there felt the same and had the nerve to make it the basis of his art. I was one of those readers. It was a great relief to discover the writings of someone who didn't go for the same consolations as most of the rest of the world, even if the consolations they did go for were no less questionable. I think that some of my readers look at my stories similarly. And those are the ones who will appreciate Conspiracy. As for anyone else, I couldn't say. The book could very well be judged as badly done on its own terms. It would also be easy for anyone to dismiss it by saying that its author is just a nutjob and has always been a nutjob who should be pitied or justly derogated or simply ignored. I would be in no position to argue with such an assessment, since the general estimation of the reading public about themselves and their existence is so different from mine. I myself don't believe that my experi-

ence itself is so different from that of most people, but the conclusions I've drawn from my experience are indeed quite different. Furthermore, the whole point of Conspiracy is that pessimism as a resolute life-stance is not welcome to the minds very many people, even when it's laid out as entertainingly as possible, which I've tried to do. But pessimistic works have never been well received as a rule. And I'm not naïve enough to think that it could ever be any other way.

Source: http://mumpsimus.blogspot.co.uk/2007/10/conversation-with-thomas-ligotti.html

Mark McLaughlin: The Frolic: Deviltry On DVD, March, 2008

Horror Garage: I just watched the masterful short film they made out of your short story, “The Frolic.” Is this the first time your work has been made into a film? What are the plans for its distribution — will it play at any film festivals or conventions?

> Thomas Ligotti: This is indeed the first time any of my stories have been adapted as a film. At this time, I believe that the DVD is available only through direct sale from Wonder Entertainment. The film has already been previewed at several conventions and film festivals. For a relatively lengthy review and further information, click here.

HG: What were your thoughts as you watched this movie of your work for the first time? Did you like the performers they picked to play your characters?

> Thomas Ligotti: I saw the film in several preliminary forms before I saw the final product. Since I was the co-writer of the script with Brandon Trenz, I was intrigued as hell to see how it would come out vis-à-vis its direction, acting, production design, and everything else one looks for in any film. As I watched it for the first time, I thought: “This looks like a real movie.” I know that everyone involved in

the production put a lot of work into every aspect of it. I talk about this in the interview included in the book that accompanies the DVD. The performances of the actors were terrific. The two principal actors, Michael Reilly Burke and Maury Sterling are pros that anyone who watches TV and movies has seen. I remember watching some episodes of the show 24 in which Michael Reilly Burke played a character who plots to assassinate the President. And Maury Sterling turns up often on cop shows. Sterling has such a unique presence he stands out in any role he plays. In The Frolic, I think he was allowed to pull out all the stops of his abilities as an actor, which is something you have to see to believe. He both embodied and embellished the character of John Doe from my very early story "The Frolic."

HG: Are any more Ligotti movies in the works?

Thomas Ligotti: There are some tentative plans, but everything in Hollywood is tentative until an actual movie is released.

HG: If you could select any of your past works to be turned into a film, with your choice of director and cast — with no worries about budget! — which story would you pick, and who would direct it and star in it?

Thomas Ligotti: My choice of which stories I would like to see adapted as film is skewed toward what I think would make a good movie of the kind that I myself would want to see and that I can imagine would be makeable without transforming it into an-

other creature altogether. From this perspective, the work of mine that I would most want to see made into a film is my short novel My Work Is Not Yet Done. I would want to see a solid, intelligent, and imaginative director go to work on this narrative—someone like David Fincher, Brad Anderson, or David Cronenberg. Since My Work Is Not Yet Done would demand as much acting and action, these are the first directors that come to mind, since Fincher did The Usual Suspects and Se7en, Brad Anderson did Session 9 — the best horror movie in recent memory — and Cronenberg has made the bold statement in an interview that "To me, the 'talking head' is the essence of cinema," something that he backs up in both his earlier movies like The Dead Zone and Videodrome, as well as his newer movies like A History of Violence and Eastern Promises. Regarding actors, I think Johnny Depp would be great, because he can play low-key "normal" characters, as he did in In the Nick of Time, and whack jobs as he did in Sweeney Todd, both of which would be required for the portrayal of Frank Dominio in My Work Is Not Yet Done. Actually, I think that Maury Sterling could also do amazing turn as this character. Oh yeah, Maury Sterling would be great.

HG: What other literary projects do you have in the works?

Thomas Ligotti: I've been working forever on a nonfiction book called The Conspiracy Against the Human Race: A Short Life of Horror. In Conspiracy I

attempt to bind together themes from the works of pessimistic philosophers and horror writers into an exposition on the uncanny nature and ontological fraudulence of the human species.

HG: Here's the question I'm sure you get asked all the time: when are we going to see a Ligotti novel?

Thomas Ligotti: I think it's safe to say that I will never write a novel. The reason is this: I really don't like fiction, and novels are what fiction is all about. The only fictional works that I've ever admired are those which have their formal basis in essays (Borges), poetry (Bruno Schulz), monologues (Thomas Bernhard), or all three (Poe and Lovecraft). I want to hear a writer speaking, not see a movie in my mind that takes days or weeks to get through rather than 100 minutes or the time it takes to watch a multi-part mini-series. Why would anyone want to read The Silence of the Lambs when they could see the movie? A fair response would be, "There are more good works of fiction — if you like fiction — than there are good movies." That's massively true. Good movies are a happy accident.

HG: You're a rather daunting personage, you know! What frightens you? What makes you smile?

Thomas Ligotti: I never knew that I was a daunting person until people with whom I worked at a publishing company told me I was daunting. Of course, they didn't say that until they got to know me and understood that I was more afraid of them than

they were of me. What frightens me? All the ghastly ways in which one can suffer in this world. I think about them all the time and say to myself, “I've got to kill myself before something like happens to me.” Unfortunately, I'm afraid of dying. Unless I'm in a depressive phase, in which case I'm not afraid of anything. What makes me smile? That brings to might a sentence from E.M. Cioran: “Nobility is only in the negation of existence, in a smile that surveys annihilated landscapes.” I think that if I could walk from one end of the world to the other and see nothing but annihilated landscapes, that would make me smile. I've always thought that I would make a good last man on earth.

HG: You rose up through the ranks of the printed small-press. How has the internet changed the way writers earn their stripes?

Thomas Ligotti: I have no idea. I don't frequent fiction sites on the internet. Twenty years ago I would have been all over the horror sites on the internet. One thing I've noticed from the books and anthologies that people kindly send to me is that horror writers are better today than they were when I started writing. I may not care for their work, but I know that it's good — more polished, more imaginative, more everything. Perhaps the internet has had something to do with that because you have a chance to read so many writers and develop a sense of standards that was higher than it was in the past, at least for short stories. The burgeoning of small-

press horror publishers no doubt also has something to do with how good horror writers are today.

HG: How has the internet changed the way you do business as a writer?

Thomas Ligotti: I've never really done business as a writer, unless you mean as a freelance writer and editor. There were a number of jobs I couldn't have done without the internet.

HG: Where on the internet can people find out more about your work? How involved are you with these online venues?

Thomas Ligotti: There's a site called Thomas Ligotti Online, but it's not a personal site in which I have much involvement. It was developed by a gentleman named Brian Edward Poe. Seriously. There's not only stuff about me on the site but tons of music, art, and writing by TLO members. I can actually find out more about myself as a horror writer on that site than I can on my own. If I want to find out what I've published, when, and how many times, I refer to Doug Anderson's up-to-date bibliography on TLO.

HG: Society and technology are evolving at a frantic pace — how is horror, as a genre, evolving to match those changes?

Thomas Ligotti: I don't think that horror is a genre that evolves or has ever evolved. I think it “develops” in a way that parallels the “Great Man” theory of history. Every so often a writer comes along who

changes the way other writers in the horror genre write. Examples: Poe, Lovecraft, Stephen King.

HG: Thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts with the readers of Horror Garage. I'll make your final question an easy one! What are you having for dinner tonight?

Thomas Ligotti: Leftovers. I like leftovers better than first-times. I think that there should be restaurants than serve food made the day before. Like roast beef. Who wants to eat roast beef and potatoes and all that when you can have roast beef hash with everything all mixed together? And how about day-old pizza?

Source: http://www.horrorgarage.com/horror/interview-thomas-ligotti.php

Index Of Stories

Struck-through links are currently missing from this collection. ‘The’ and ‘A/An’ are ignored for alphabetical ordering purposes, i.e. *The Mystics Of Muelenburg* is to be found amongst *Mad Night Of Atonement* and *The Medusa*. The links go to the most recent version of each story.

The Agonizing Resurrection of Victor Frankenstein, Citizen of Geneva

Alice's Last Adventure

Allen and Adelaide: An Arabesque

Autumnal

The Dark Beauty Of Unheard-Of Horrors

The Bells Will Sound Forever

The Blasphemous Enlightenment of Prof. Francis Wayland Thurston of Boston, Providence, and the Human Race

The Bungalow House

The Career of Nightmares

Charnelhouse of the Moon

The Christmas Eves of Aunt Elise: A Tale of Possession in Old Grosse Pointe

The Chymist

The Clown Puppet

The Cocoons

The Consolations Of Horror

Conversations in a Dead Language

Crampton

The Dark Beauty Of Unheard-Of Horrors

Death Poems

Death without End

This Degenerate Little Town

Demonic Horror

The Demon Man

The Dreaming in Nortown

Dream of a Mannikin

Dreamworld Horror

Drink to Me Only with Labyrinthine Eyes

Dr. Locrian's Asylum

Dr. Voke and Mr. Veech

Envoi

The Eternal Devotion of the Governess to the Residents of Bly

The Eternal Mirage

The Ever-Vigilant Guardians of Secluded Estates

The Excruciating Final Days of Dr. Henry Jekyll, Englishman

Exotic Horror

Eye of the Lynx

The Fabulous Alienation of the Outsider, Being of No Fixed Abode

Flowers of the Abyss

The Frolic

Gas Station Carnivals

Ghost Stories for the Dead

The Glamour

Gothic Horror

The Greater Festival of Masks

The Heart of Count Dracula, Descendant of Attila, Scourge of God

His Shadow Shall Rise to a Higher House

I Have a Special Plan for This World

The Inquisitor

In the Shadow of Another World

The Insufferable Salvation of Lawrence Talbot the Wolf-man

The Interminable Equation

The Interminable Residence of the Friends of the House of Usher

An Interview With Louis Miguel Riaz

The Intolerable Lesson of the Phantom of the Opera

Invocation to the Void

The Journal of J.P. Drapeau

The Last Feast Of Harlequin

Les Fleurs

The Library of Byzantium

The Lost Art of Twilight

Macabre Horror

Mad Night of Atonement

Masquerade of a Dead Sword: A Tragedie

The Master's Eyes Shining with Secrets

The Mechanical Museum

The Medusa

Metaphysica Morum

Miss Plarr

The Mocking Mystery

Mrs. Rinaldi's Angel

The Music of the Moon

My Case for Retributive Action

The Mystics of Muelenburg

My Work Is Not Yet Done

The Nameless Horror

Nethescurial

New Faces in the City

Nightmare Horror

The Nightmare Network

The Night School

Nihilistic Horror

Notes on the Writing of Horror: A Story

Occult Horror

The Old Shelters

One May Be Dreaming

One Thousand Painful Variations Performed Upon Divers Creatures Undergoing the Treatment of Dr. Moreau, Humanist

The Order of Illusion

Our Temporary Supervisor

Paradoxes From Hell

The Perilous Legacy of Emily St. Aubert, Inheritress of Udolpho

The Physic

Prehistoric Horror

The Premature Death of H.P. Lovecraft, Oldest Man in New England

The Premature Transfiguration

Primordial Loathing

The Prodigy of Dreams

Professor Nobody's Little Lectures on Supernatural Horror

Puppet Horror

The Puppet Masters

Purity

The Real Wolf

The Red Tower

Salvation by Doom

Sardonic Mundane

The Scream: from 1800 to the Present

The Sect of the Idiot

Severini

The Shadow at the Bottom of the World

The Shadow, The Darkness

Sideshow and Other Stories

The Small People

A Soft Voice Whispers Nothing

The Spectacles in the Drawer

The Spectral Estate

Spectral Horror

The Spectral Link (Introduction)

The Strange Design of Master Rignolo

Suicide By Imagination

The Superb Companion of André de V., Anti-Pygmalion

Teatro Grottesco

Ten Steps to Thin Mountain

Things They Will Never Tell You

The Town Manager

The Transparent Alias of William Wilson, Sportsman and Scoundrel

The Troubles of Dr. Thoss

The Tsalal

The Unbearable Rebirth of the Phantom of the Wax Museum

The Unfamiliar

The Unholy City

The Unnatural Persecution, by a Vampire, of Mr. Jacob J.

Unreal Horror

Vastarien

The Voice in the Bones

We Can Hide From Horror Only In The Heart Of Horror: Notes And Aphorisms

When You Hear The Singing, You Will Know It Is Time

The Worthy Inmate of the Will of the Lady Ligeia

The Conspiracy against the Human Race

A Contrivance of Horror

Thomas Ligotti

To the memory of Peter Wessel Zapffe

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Contents

Foreword *by Ray Brassier*
Introduction: Of Pessimism and Paradox
The Nightmare of Being
Who Goes There?
Freaks of Salvation
Sick to Death
The Cult of Grinning Martyrs
Autopsy on a Puppet: An Anatomy of the Supernatural
Notes

Foreword

Ray Brassier

We know what verdict is reserved for those foolhardy enough to dissent from the common conviction according to which "being alive is all right," to borrow an insistent phrase from the volume at hand. Disputants of the normative buoyancy of our race can expect to be chastised for their ingratitude, upbraided for their cowardice, patronized for their shallowness. Where self-love provides the indubitable index of psychic health, its default can only ever be seen as a symptom of psychic debility. Philosophy, which once disdained opinion, becomes craven when the opinion in question is whether or not *being alive is all right*. Suitably ennobled by the epithet "tragic," the approbation of life is immunized against the charge of complacency and those who denigrate it condemned as ingrates.

"Optimism"; "pessimism": Thomas Ligotti takes the measure of these discredited words, stripping them of the patina of familiarity that has robbed them of their pertinence, and restoring to them some of their original substance. The optimist fixes the exchange rate between joy and woe, thereby determining the value of life. The pessimist, who refuses the principle of exchange and the injunction to keep investing in the future no matter how worthless life's currency in the present, is stigmatized as an unreliable investor.

The Conspiracy against the Human Race sets out what is perhaps the most sustained challenge yet to the intellectual blackmail that would oblige us to be eternally grateful for a "gift" we never invited. Being alive is *not* all right: this simple *not* encapsulates the temerity of thinking better than any platitude about the tragic nobility of a life characterized by a surfeit of suffering, frustration, and self-deceit. There is no nature worth revering or rejoining; there is no self to be re-enthroned as captain of its own fate; there is no future worth working towards or hoping for. Life, in Ligotti's outsized stamp of disapproval, is MALIGNANTLY USELESS.

No doubt, critics will try to indict Ligotti of bad faith by claiming that the writing of this book is itself driven by the imperatives of the life that he seeks to excoriate. But the charge is trumped-up, since Ligotti explicitly avows the impossibility for the living to successfully evade life's grip. This admission leaves the cogency of his diagnosis intact, for as Ligotti knows full well, if living is lying, then even telling the truth about life's lie will be a sublimated lie.

Such sublimation is as close to truth-telling as Ligotti's exacting nihilism will allow. Unencumbered by the cringing deference towards social utility that straightjackets most professional philosophers, Ligotti's unsparing dissection of the sophisms spun by life's apologists proves him to be a more acute pathologist of the human condition than any sanctimonious philanthrope.

Look at your body—
A painted puppet, a poor toy
Of jointed parts ready to collapse,
A diseased and suffering thing
With a head full of false imaginings.
—*The Dhammapada*

Introduction:
Of Pessimism and Paradox

In his study *The Nature of Evil* (1931), Radoslav A. Tsanoff cites a terse reflection set down by the German philosopher Julius Bahnsen in 1847, when he was seventeen years old. "Man is a self-conscious Nothing," wrote Bahnsen. Whether one considers these words to be juvenile or precocious, they belong to an ancient tradition of scorn for our species and its aspirations. All the same, the reigning sentiments on the human venture normally fall between qualified approval and loud-mouthed braggadocio. As a rule, anyone desirous of an audience, or even a place in society, might profit from the following motto: "If you can't say something positive about humanity, then say something equivocal."

Returning to Bahnsen, he grew up to become a philosopher who not only had nothing either positive or equivocal to say about humanity, but who also arrived at a dour assessment of all existence. Like many who have tried their hand at metaphysics, Bahnsen declared that, appearances to the contrary, all reality is the expression of a unified, unchanging force—a cosmic movement that various philosophers have characterized in various ways. To Bahnsen, this force and its movement were monstrous in nature, resulting in a universe of indiscriminate butchery and mutual slaughter among its individuated parts. Additionally, the "universe according to Bahnsen" has never had a hint of design or direction. From the beginning, it was a play with no plot and no players that were anything more than portions of a master drive of purposeless self-mutilation. In Bahnsen's philosophy, everything is engaged in a disordered fantasia of carnage. Everything tears away at everything else … forever. Yet all this commotion in nothingness goes unnoticed by nearly everything involved in it. In the world of nature, as an instance, nothing knows of its embroilment in a festival of massacres. Only

Bahnsen's self-conscious Nothing can know what is going on and be shaken by the tremors of *chaos at feast.*

As with all pessimistic philosophies, Bahnsen's rendering of existence as something strange and awful was unwelcome by the self-conscious nothings whose validation he sought. For better or worse, pessimism without compromise lacks public appeal. In all, the few who have gone to the pains of arguing for a sullen appraisal of life might as well never have been born. As history confirms, people will change their minds about almost anything, from which god they worship to how they style their hair. But when it comes to existential judgments, human beings in general have an unfalteringly good opinion of themselves and their condition in this world and are steadfastly confident they are not a collection of self-conscious nothings.

Must all reproof of our species' self-contentment then be renounced? That would be the brilliant decision, rule number one for deviants from the norm. Rule number two: If you must open your mouth, steer away from debate. Money and love may make the world go round, but disputation with that world cannot get it to budge if it is not of a mind to do so. Thus British author and Christian apologist G. K. Chesterton: "You can only find truth with logic if you have already found truth without it." What Chesterton means to say here is that logic is irrelevant to truth, because if you can find truth without logic then logic is superfluous to any truth-finding effort. Indeed, his only motive for bringing logic into his formulation is to taunt those who find logic quite relevant to finding truth, although not the kind of truth that was pivotal to Chesterton's morale as a Christian.

Renowned for stating his convictions in the form of a paradox, as above, Chesterton, along with anyone who has something positive or equivocal to say about the human race, comes out on top in the crusade for truth. (There is nothing paradoxical about that.) Therefore, should your truth run counter to that of individuals who devise or applaud paradoxes that stiff up the status quo, you would be well advised

to take your arguments, tear them up, and throw them in someone else's garbage.

To be sure, though, futile argumentation has its attractions and may act as an amusing complement to the bitter joy of spewing gut-level vituperations, personal idolatries, and rampant pontifications. To absolve such an unruly application of the rational and the irrational (not that they are ever separable), the present "contrivance of horror" has been anchored in the thesis of a philosopher who had disquieting thoughts about what it is like to be a member of the human race. But too much should not be telegraphed in this prelude to abjection. For the time being, it need only be said that the philosopher in question made much of human existence as a tragedy that need not have been were it not for the intervention in our lives of a single, calamitous event: the evolution of consciousness—parent of all horrors. He also portrayed humanity as a species of contradictory beings whose continuance only worsens their plight, which is that of mutants who embody the contorted logic of a paradox—a real-life paradox and not a bungled epigram.

Even an offhand review of the topic will show that not all paradoxes are alike. Some are merely rhetorical, an apparent contradiction of logic that, if well juggled, may be intelligibly resolved within a specific context. More intriguing are those paradoxes that torture our notions of reality. In the literature of supernatural horror, a familiar storyline is that of a character who encounters a paradox *in the flesh,* so to speak, and must face down or collapse in horror before this ontological perversion—something which should not be, and yet is. Most fabled as specimens of a living paradox are the "undead," those walking cadavers greedy for an eternal presence on earth. But whether their existence should go on unendingly or be cut short by a stake in the heart is not germane to the matter at hand. What is exceedingly material resides in the supernatural horror that such beings could exist in their impossible way for an instant. Other examples of paradox and supernatural horror congealing together are inanimate

things guilty of infractions against their nature. Perhaps the most outstanding instance of this phenomenon is a puppet that breaks free of its strings and becomes *self-mobilized*.

For a brief while, let us mull over some items of interest regarding puppets. They are made as they are made by puppet makers and manipulated to behave in certain ways by a puppet master's will. The puppets under discussion here are those made in our image, although never with such fastidiousness that we would mistake them for human beings. If they were so created, their resemblance to our soft shapes would be a strange and awful thing, too strange and awful, in fact, to be countenanced without alarm. Given that alarming people has little to do with merchandising puppets, they are not created so fastidiously in our image that we would mistake them for human beings, except perhaps in the half-light of a dank cellar or cluttered attic. We need to know that puppets are puppets. Nevertheless, we may still be alarmed by them. Because if we look at a puppet in a certain way, we may sometimes feel it is looking back, not as a human being looks at us but as a puppet does. It may even seem to be on the brink of coming to life. In such moments of mild disorientation, a psychological conflict erupts, a dissonance of perception that sends through our being a convulsion of supernatural horror.

A sibling term of supernatural horror is the "uncanny." Both terms are pertinent in reference to nonhuman forms that disport human qualities. Both may also refer to seemingly animate forms that are not what they seem, as with the undead—monstrosities of paradox, things that are neither one thing nor another, or, more uncannily, and more horrifically supernatural, things that are discovered to be two things at once. Whether or not there really are manifestations of the supernatural, they are horrifying to us in concept, since we think ourselves to be living in a natural world, which may be a festival of massacres but only in a physical rather than a metaphysical purport. This is why we routinely equate the supernatural with horror. And a puppet possessed of life would exemplify just such a horror, because it would negate

all conceptions of a natural physicalism and affirm a metaphysics of chaos and nightmare. It would still be a puppet, but it would be a puppet with a mind and a will, a *human* puppet—a paradox more disruptive of sanity than the undead. But that is not how *they* would see it. Human puppets could not conceive of themselves as being puppets at all, not when they are fixed with a consciousness that excites in them the unshakable sense of being singled out from all other objects in creation. Once you begin to feel you are making a go of it on your own—that you are making moves and thinking thoughts which seem to have originated within you—it is not possible for you to believe you are anything but your own master.

As effigies of ourselves, puppets are not equal partners with us in the world. They are actors in a world of their own, one that exists inside of ours and reflects back upon it. What do we see in that reflection? Only what we want to see, what we can stand to see. Through the prophylactic of self-deception, we keep hidden what we do not want to let into our heads, as if we will betray to ourselves a *secret too terrible to know.* Our lives abound with baffling questions that some attempt to answer and the rest of us let pass. Naked apes or incarnate angels we may believe ourselves to be, but not human puppets. Of a higher station than these impersonators of our species, we move freely about and can speak any time we like. We believe we are making a go of it on our own, and anyone who contradicts this belief will be taken for a madman or someone who is attempting to immerse others in a contrivance of horror. How to take seriously a puppet master who has *gone over to the other side*?

When puppets are done with their play, they go back in their boxes. They do not sit in a chair reading a book, their eyes rolling like marbles over its words. They are only objects, like a corpse in a casket. If they ever came to life, our world would be a paradox and a horror in which everything was uncertain, including whether or not we were just human puppets.

All supernatural horror obtains in what we believe should be and should not be. As scientists, philosophers, and spiritual figures have testified, our heads are full of illusions; things, including human things, are not dependably what they seem. Yet one thing we know for sure: the difference between what is natural and what is not. Another thing we know is that nature makes no blunders so untoward as to allow things, including human things, to swerve into supernaturalism. Were it to make such a blunder, we would do everything in our power to bury this knowledge. But we need not resort to such measures, being as natural as we are. No one can prove that our life in this world is a supernatural horror, nor cause us to suspect that it might be. Anybody can tell you that—not least a contriver of books that premise the supernatural, the uncanny, and the frightfully paradoxical as essential to our nature.

The Nightmare of Being

Psychogenesis

For ages they had been without lives of their own. The whole of their being was open to the world and nothing divided them from the rest of creation. How long they had thus flourished none of them knew. Then something began to change. It happened over unremembered generations. The signs of a revision without forewarning were being writ ever more deeply into them. As their species moved forward, they began crossing boundaries whose very existence they never imagined. After nightfall, they looked up at a sky filled with stars and felt themselves small and fragile in the vastness. Soon they began to see everything in a way they never had in older times. When they found one of their own lying still and stiff, they now stood around the body as if there were something they should do that they had never done before. It was then they began to take bodies that were still and stiff to distant places so they could not find their way back to them. But even after they had done this, some within their group did see those bodies again, often standing silent in the moonlight or loitering sad-faced just beyond the glow of a fire. Everything changed once they had lives of their own and knew they had lives of their own. It even became impossible for them to believe things had ever been any other way. They were masters of their movements now, as it seemed, and never had there been anything like them. The epoch had passed when the whole of their being was open to the world and nothing divided them from the rest of creation. Something had happened. They did not know what it was, but they did know it as that which *should not be.* And something needed to be done if they were to flourish as they once had, if the very ground beneath their feet were not to fall out from under them. For ages they had been without lives of their own. Now that they had such lives there was no turning back. The whole of their being was closed to the world, and they had been divided from the rest of creation. Nothing could be done

about that, having as they did lives of their own. But something would have to be done if they were to live with that which *should not be*. And over time they discovered what could be done—what would have to be done—so that they could live the lives that were now theirs to live. This would not revive among them the way things had once been done in older times; it would only be the best they could do.[1]

Ante-Mortem

For thousands of years a debate has been going on in the shadowy background of human affairs. The issue to be resolved: "What should we say about being alive?" Overwhelmingly, people have said, "Being alive is all right." More thoughtful persons have added, "Especially when you consider the alternative," disclosing a jocularity as puzzling as it is macabre, since the alternative is here implied to be both disagreeable and, upon consideration, capable of making being alive seem more agreeable than it alternatively would, as if the alternative were only a possibility that may or may not come to pass, like getting the flu, rather than a looming inevitability. And yet this covertly portentous remark is perfectly well tolerated by anyone who says that being alive is all right. These individuals stand on one side of the debate. On the other side is an imperceptible minority of disputants. Their response to the question of what we should say about being alive will be neither positive nor equivocal. They may even fulminate about how objectionable it is to be alive, or spout off that to be alive is to inhabit a nightmare without hope of awakening to a natural world, to have our bodies embedded neck-deep in a quagmire of dread, to live as shut-ins in a house of horrors from which nobody gets out alive, and so on. Now, there are really no incisive answers as to why anyone thinks or feels one way and not another. The most we can say is that the first group of people is composed of optimists, although they may not think of themselves as such, while the contending group, that imperceptible minority, is composed of pessimists. The latter know who they are. But which group

is in the right—the existentially harrowed pessimists or the life-embracing optimists—will never be resolved.

If the most contemplative individuals are sometimes dubious about the value of existence, they do not often publicize their doubts but align themselves with the optimist in the street, tacitly declaiming, in more erudite terms, "Being alive is all right." The butcher, the baker, and the crushing majority of philosophers all agree on one thing: Human life is a good thing, and we should keep our species going for as long as we can. To tout the rival side of the issue is asking for grief. But some people seem born to bellyache that being alive is not all right. Should they vent this posture in philosophical or literary works, they may do so without anxiety that their efforts will have an excess of admirers. Notable among such efforts is "The Last Messiah" (1933), an essay written by the Norwegian philosopher and man of letters Peter Wessel Zapffe (1899–1990). In this work, which to date has been twice translated into English,[2] Zapffe elucidated why he saw human existence as a tragedy.

Before discussing Zapffe's elucidation of human existence as a tragedy, however, it may be useful to muse upon a few facts whose relevance will become manifest down the line. As some may know, there exist readers who treasure philosophical and literary works of a pessimistic, nihilistic, or defeatist nature as indispensable to their existence, hyperbolically speaking. Contrary by temperament, these persons are sorely aware that nothing indispensable to their existence, hyperbolically or literally speaking, must make its way into their lives, as if by natural birthright. They do not think anything indispensable to anyone's existence may be claimed as a natural birthright, since the birthrights we toss about are all lies fabricated to a purpose, as any student of humanity can verify. For those who have given thought to this matter, the only rights we may exercise are these: to seek the survival of our individual bodies, to create more bodies like our own, and to perish from corruption or mortal trauma. This is presuming that one has been brought to term and has made it to the

age of being reproductively ready, neither being a natural birthright. Stringently considered, then, our only natural birthright is a *right to die.* No other right has ever been allocated to anyone except as a fabrication, whether in modern times or days past.[3] The divine right of kings may now be acknowledged as a fabrication, a falsified permit for prideful dementia and impulsive mayhem. The inalienable rights of certain people, on the other hand, seemingly remain current: somehow we believe they are not fabrications because hallowed documents declare they are real. Miserly or munificent as a given right may appear, it denotes no more than the right of way warranted by a traffic light, which does not mean you have the right to drive free of vehicular misadventures. Ask any paramedic as your dead body is taken away to the nearest hospital.

Wide-Awake

Our want of any natural birthright—except to die, in most cases without assistance—is not a matter of tragedy, but only one of truth. Coming at last to the pith of Zapffe's thought as it is contained in "The Last Messiah," what the Norwegian philosopher saw as the tragedy of human existence had its beginnings when at some stage in our evolution we acquired "a damning surplus of consciousness." (Indulgence is begged in advance for the present work's profuse entreaties for assent, or at least suspension of disbelief, in this matter.) Naturally, it must be owned that there are quarrels among cognitive psychologists, philosophers of mind, and neuroscientists about what consciousness is. The fact that this question has been around since at least the time of the ancient Greeks and early Buddhists suggests there is an assumption of consciousness in the human species and that consciousness has had an effect on the way we exist. For Zapffe, the effect was

> A breach in the very unity of life, a biological paradox, an abomination, an absurdity, an exaggeration of disastrous nature. Life had overshot its target, blowing itself apart. A species had been armed too heavily—by spirit made almighty without, but equally a menace to its own well-being. Its weapon was like a sword without hilt or plate, a two-edged blade cleaving

> everything; but he who is to wield it must grasp the blade and turn one edge toward himself.
>
> Despite his new eyes, man was still rooted in matter, his soul spun into it and subordinated to its blind laws. And yet he could see matter as a stranger, compare himself to all phenomena, see through and locate his vital processes. He comes to nature as an unbidden guest, in vain extending his arms to beg conciliation with his maker: Nature answers no more; it performed a miracle with man, but later did not know him. He has lost his right of residence in the universe, has eaten from the Tree of Knowledge and been expelled from Paradise. He is mighty in the near world, but curses his might as purchased with his harmony of soul, his innocence, his inner peace in life's embrace.

Could there be anything to this pessimistic verbiage, this tirade against the evolution of consciousness? Millennia had passed without much discussion one way or the other on the subject, at least in polite society. Then suddenly this barrage from an obscure Norwegian philosopher. What is one to say? For contrast, here are some excerpts from an online interview with the eminent British multidisciplinary thinker Nicholas Humphrey ("A Self Worth Having: A Talk with Nicolas Humphrey," 2003):

> Consciousness—phenomenal experience—seems in many ways too good to be true. The way we experience the world seems unnecessarily beautiful, unnecessarily rich and strange….
>
> Phenomenal experience, surely, can and does provide the basis for creating a self worth having. And just see what becomes possible—even natural—once this new self is in place! As subjects of something so mysterious and strange, we humans gain new confidence and interest in our own survival, a new interest in other people too. We begin to be interested in the future, in immortality, and in all sorts of issues to do with … how far consciousness extends around us….
>
> [T]he more I try to make sense of it, the more I come back to the fact that we've evolved to regard consciousness as a wonderfully good thing in its own right—which could just be because consciousness *is* a wonderfully good thing in its own right!

Could there be anything to this *optimistic* verbiage in which consciousness is not a "breach in the very unity of life, a biological paradox, an abomination, an absurdity, an exaggeration of disastrous nature" but something that is "unnecessarily beautiful, unnecessarily rich and strange" and "a wonderfully good thing in its own right," something that makes human existence an unbelievably desirable adventure? Think

about it—a British thinker thinks so well of the evolution of consciousness that he cannot contain his gratitude for this turn of events. What is one to say? Both Humphrey and Zapffe are equally passionate about what they have to say, which is not to say that they have said anything credible. Whether you think consciousness to be a benefit or a horror, this is only what you think—and nothing else. But even though you cannot demonstrate the truth of what you think, you can at least put it on show and see what the audience thinks.

Brainwork

Over the centuries, assorted theories about the nature and workings of consciousness have been put forth. The theory Zapffe implicitly accepted is this: Consciousness is connected to the human brain in a way that makes the world appear to us as it appears and makes us appear to ourselves as we appear—that is, as "selves" or a "persons" strung together by memories, sensations, emotions, and so on. No one knows exactly how the consciousness-brain connection is made, but all evidence supports the non-dualistic theory that the brain is the source of consciousness and the only source of consciousness. Zapffe accepted consciousness as a given and moved on from there, since he was not interested in the debates surrounding this phenomenon as such but only in the way it determines the nature of our species. This was enough for his purposes, which were wholly existential and careless of seeking technical explanations for the workings of consciousness. Anyway, how consciousness "happened," since it was not always present in our species, remains as much a mystery in our time as it was in Zapffe's, just as the process of how life came about from materials that were not living remains a mystery. First there was no life, and then there was life—nature, as it came to be called. As nature proliferated into more complex and various forms, human organisms eventually entered the world as part of this process. After a time, consciousness happened for these organisms (and a few others at much lower amplitudes). And it kept on gaining

steam as we evolved. On this all theorists of consciousness agree. Billions of years after earth made a jump from being lifeless to having life, human beings made a jump from not being conscious, or very much conscious, to being conscious enough to esteem or condemn this phenomenon. No one knows either how the jump was made or how long it took, although there are theories about both, as there are theories about all mutations from one state to another.

"The mutations must be considered blind," Zapffe wrote. "They work, are thrown forth, without any contact of interest with their environment." As mentioned, how the mutation of consciousness originated was of no concern to Zapffe, who focused entirely on demonstrating the tragic effect of this aptitude. Such projects are typical among pessimistic philosophers. Non-pessimistic philosophers either have an impartial attitude about consciousness or, like Nicholas Humphrey, think of it as a marvelous endowment. When non-pessimistic philosophers even notice the pessimist's attitude, they reject it. With the world on their side in the conviction that being alive is all right, non-pessimists are not disposed to musing that human existence is a wholesale tragedy. They only argue the fine points of whatever it is about human existence that grabs their attention, which may include the tragic but not so much that they lose their commitment to the proposition that being alive is all right. And they can do this until the day they die, which is all right by them.

Mutation

Established: Consciousness is not often viewed as being an instrument of tragedy in human life. But to Zapffe, consciousness would long past have proved fatal for human beings if we did not do something about it. "Why," Zapffe asked, "has mankind not long ago gone extinct during great epidemics of madness? Why do only a fairly minor number of individuals perish because they fail to endure the strain of living —because cognition gives them more than they can carry?" Zapffe's answer: "Most people learn to save themselves by artificially limiting the content of consciousness."

From an evolutionary viewpoint, in Zapffe's observation, consciousness was a blunder that required corrections for its effects. It was an adventitious outgrowth that made us into a race of contradictory beings—uncanny things that have nothing to do with the rest of creation. Because of consciousness, parent of all horrors, we became susceptible to thoughts that were startling and dreadful to us, thoughts that have never been equitably balanced by those that are collected and reassuring. Our minds now began dredging up horrors, flagrantly joyless possibilities, enough of them to make us drop to the ground in paroxysms of self-soiling consternation should they go untrammeled. This potentiality necessitated that certain defense mechanisms be put to use to keep us balanced on the knife-edge of vitality as a species.

While a modicum of consciousness may have had survivalist properties during an immemorial chapter of our evolution—so one theory goes—this faculty soon enough became a seditious agent working against us. As Zapffe concluded, we need to hamper our consciousness for all we are worth or it will impose upon us a too clear vision of what we do not want to see, which, as the Norwegian philosopher saw it, along with every other pessimist, is "the brotherhood of suffering between everything alive." Whether or not one agrees that there is a "brotherhood of suffering between everything alive," we can all agree that human beings are the only organisms that can have such a conception of existence, or any conception period. That we can conceive of the phenomenon of suffering, our own as well as that of other organisms, is a property unique to us as a dangerously conscious species. We know there is suffering, and we do take action against it, which includes downplaying it by "artificially limiting the content of consciousness." Between taking action against and downplaying suffering, mainly the latter, most of us do not worry that it has overly sullied our existence.

As a fact, we cannot give suffering precedence in either our individual or collective lives. We have to *get on with things,* and those who give precedence to suffering will be left behind. They fetter us with their sniveling. We have someplace

to go and must believe we can get there, wherever that may be. And to conceive that there is a "brotherhood of suffering between everything alive" would disable us from getting anywhere. We are preoccupied with the good life, and step by step are working toward a better life. What we do, as a conscious species, is set markers for ourselves. Once we reach one marker, we advance to the next—as if we were playing a board game we think will never end, despite the fact that it will, like it or not. And if you are too conscious of not liking it, then you may conceive of yourself as a biological paradox that cannot live with its consciousness and cannot live without it. And in so living and not living, you take your place with the undead and the human puppet.

Undoing I

For the rest of the earth's organisms, existence is relatively uncomplicated. Their lives are about three things: survival, reproduction, death—and nothing else. But we know too much to content ourselves with surviving, reproducing, dying—and nothing else. We know we are alive and know we will die. We also know we will suffer during our lives before suffering—slowly or quickly—as we draw near to death. This is the knowledge we "enjoy" as the most intelligent organisms to gush from the womb of nature. And being so, we feel shortchanged if there is nothing else for us than to survive, reproduce, and die. We want there to be more to it than that, or to think there is. This is the tragedy: Consciousness has forced us into the paradoxical position of striving to be unself-conscious of what we are—hunks of spoiling flesh on disintegrating bones.

Nonhuman occupants of this planet are unaware of death. But we are susceptible to startling and dreadful thoughts, and we need some fabulous illusions to take our minds off them. For us, then, life is a confidence trick we must run on ourselves, hoping we do not catch on to any monkey business that would leave us stripped of our defense mechanisms and standing stark naked before the silent, staring void. To end this self-deception, to free our species of the paradoxical im-

perative to be and not to be conscious, our backs breaking by degrees upon a wheel of lies, *we must cease reproducing.* Nothing less will do, per Zapffe, although in "The Last Messiah" the character after whom the essay is named does all the talking about human extinction. Elsewhere Zapffe speaks for himself on the subject.

> The sooner humanity dares to harmonize itself with its biological predicament, the better. And this means to willingly withdraw in contempt for its worldly terms, just as the heat-craving species went extinct when temperatures dropped. To us, it is the moral climate of the cosmos that is intolerable, and a two-child policy could make our discontinuance a pain-free one. Yet instead we are expanding and succeeding everywhere, as necessity has taught us to mutilate the formula in our hearts. Perhaps the most unreasonable effect of such invigorating vulgarization is the doctrine that the individual "has a duty" to suffer nameless agony and a terrible death if this saves or benefits the rest of his group. Anyone who declines is subjected to doom and death, instead of revulsion being directed at the world-order engendering of the situation. To any independent observer, this plainly is to juxtapose incommensurable things; no future triumph or metamorphosis can justify the pitiful blighting of a human being against his will. It is upon a pavement of battered destinies that the survivors storm ahead toward new bland sensations and mass deaths. ("Fragments of an Interview," *Aftenposten,* 1959)

More provocative than it is astonishing, Zapffe's thought is perhaps the most elementary in the history of philosophical pessimism. As penetrable as it is cheerless, it rests on taboo commonplaces and outlawed truisms while eschewing the recondite brain-twisters of his forerunners, all of whom engaged in the kind of convoluted cerebration that for thousands of years has been philosophy's stock in trade. For example, *The World as Will and Representation* (two volumes, 1819 and 1844) by the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer lays out one of the most absorbingly intricate metaphysical systems ever contrived—a quasi-mystical elaboration of a "Will-to-live" as the hypostasis of reality, a mindless and untiring master of all being, a directionless force that makes everything do what it does, an imbecilic puppeteer that sustains the ruckus of our world. But Schopenhauer's Will-to-live, commendable as it may seem as a hypothesis, is too overwrought in the proving to be anything more than another intellectual labyrinth for specialists in perplexity. Com-

paratively, Zapffe's principles are non-technical and could never arouse the passion of professors or practitioners of philosophy, who typically circle around the minutiae of theories and not the gross facts of our lives. If we must think, it should be done only in circles, outside of which lies the unthinkable. Evidence: While commentators on Schopenhauer's thought have seized upon it as a philosophical system ripe for academic analysis, they do not emphasize that its ideal endpoint—the denial of the Will-to-live—is a construct for the end of human existence. But even Schopenhauer himself did not push this as aspect of his philosophy to its ideal endpoint, which has kept him in fair repute as a philosopher.

Zombification

As adumbrated above, Zapffe arrived at two central determinations regarding humanity's "biological predicament." The first was that consciousness had overreached the point of being a sufferable property of our species, and to minimize this problem we must minimize our consciousness. From the many and various ways this may be done, Zapffe chose to hone in on four principal strategies.

> (1) ISOLATION. So that we may live without going into a free-fall of trepidation, we isolate the dire facts of being alive by relegating them to a remote compartment of our minds. They are the lunatic family members in the attic whose existence we deny in a conspiracy of silence.
>
> (2) ANCHORING. To stabilize our lives in the tempestuous waters of chaos, we conspire to anchor them in metaphysical and institutional "verities"—God, Morality, Natural Law, Country, Family—that inebriate us with a sense of being official, authentic, and safe in our beds.
>
> (3) DISTRACTION. To keep our minds unreflective of a world of horrors, we distract them with a world of trifling or momentous trash. The most operant method for furthering the conspiracy, it is in continuous employ and demands only that people keep their eyes on the ball—or their television sets, their government's foreign policy, their science projects, their careers, their place in society or the universe, etc.
>
> (4) SUBLIMATION. That we might annul a paralyzing stage fright at what may happen to even the soundest bodies and minds, we sublimate our fears by making an open display of them. In the Zapffean sense, sublimation is the rarest technique utilized for conspiring against the human race. Putting into play both deviousness and skill, this is what thinkers and artistic types do when they recycle the most demoralizing and unnerving aspects of life as works in which the worst fortunes of humanity are presented in a stylized and removed manner as entertainment. In so many words, these thinkers

> and artistic types confect products that provide an escape from our suffering by a bogus simulation of it—a tragic drama or philosophical woolgathering, for instance. Zapffe uses "The Last Messiah" to showcase how a literary-philosophical composition cannot perturb its creator or anyone else with the severity of true-to-life horrors but only provide a pale representation of these horrors, just as a King Lear's weeping for his dead daughter Cordelia cannot rend its audience with the throes of the real thing.

By watchful practice of the above connivances, we may keep ourselves from scrutinizing too assiduously the startling and dreadful mishaps that may befall us. These must come as a surprise, for if we expected them then the conspiracy could not work its magic. Naturally, conspiracy theories seldom pique the curiosity of "right-minded" individuals and are met with disbelief and denial when they do. Best to immunize your consciousness from any thoughts that are startling and dreadful so that we can all go on conspiring to survive and reproduce as paradoxical beings—puppets that can walk and talk all by themselves. At worst keep your startling and dreadful thoughts to yourself. Hearken well: "None of us wants to hear spoken the exact anxieties we keep locked up inside ourselves. Smother that urge to go spreading news of your pain and nightmares around town. Bury your dead but don't leave a trace. And be sure to get on with things or we will get on without you."

In his 1910 doctoral dissertation, published in English as *Persuasion and Rhetoric* (2004), the twenty-three-year-old Carlo Michelstaedter audited the tactics we use to falsify human existence as we trade who we are, or might be, for a specious view of ourselves. Like Pinocchio, Michelstaedter wanted to be a "real boy" and not the product of a puppet maker who, in turn, did not make himself but was made as he was made by mutations that, as Zapffe relays to us from evolutionary theory, "must be considered blind," a series of accidents that continually structure and restructure all that exists in the workshop of the world. To Michelstaedter, nothing in this world can be anything but a puppet. And a puppet is only a plaything, a thing of parts brought together as a simulacrum of real presence. It is nothing in itself. It is not whole and in-

dividual but exists only relative to other playthings, some of them human playthings that support one another's illusion of being real. However, by suppressing thoughts of suffering and death they give themselves away as beings of paradox—prevaricators who must hide from themselves the flagrantly joyless possibilities of their lives if they are to go on living. In *Persuasion and Rhetoric,* Michelstaedter pinpoints the paradox of our division from ourselves: "man 'knows,' which is why he is always two: his *life* and his *knowing.*"

Michelstaedter's biographers and critics have speculated that his despair of humanity's ability to become disentangled from its puppet strings was, in conjunction with accidental factors, the cause of his suicide by gunshot the day after he finished his dissertation. Michelstaedter could not accept a stellar fact of human life: that none of us has control over what we are—a truth that extirpates all hope if what you want to be is invulnerably self-possessed ("persuaded") and without subjection to a life that would fit you within the limits of its unrealities ("rhetoric," a word oddly used by Michelstaedter). We are defined by our limitations; without them, we cannot suffice as functionaries in the big show of conscious existence. The farther you progress toward a vision of our species without limiting conditions on your consciousness, the farther you drift away from what makes you a person among persons in the human community. In the observance of Zapffe, an unleashed consciousness would alert us to the falsity of ourselves and subject us to the pain of Pinocchio. An individual's demarcations as a being, not his trespass of them, create his identity and preserve his illusion of being something special and not a freak of chance, a product of blind mutations. Transcending all illusions and their emergent activities—having absolute control of what we are and not what we need to be so that we may survive the most unsavory facts of life and death—would untether us from the moorings of our self-limited selves. The lesson: "Let us love our limitations, for without them nobody would be left to be somebody."

Undoing II

The second of Zapffe's two central determinations—that our species should belay reproducing itself—immediately brings to mind a cast of characters from theological history known as Gnostics. The Gnostic sect of the Cathari in twelfth-century France were so tenacious in believing the world to be an evil place engendered by an evil deity that its members were offered a dual ultimatum: sexual abstinence or sodomy. (A similar sect in Bulgaria, the Bogomils, became the etymological origin of the term "buggery" for their practice of this mode of erotic release.) Around the same period, the Catholic Church mandated abstinence for its clerics, a directive that did not halt them from betimes giving in to sexual quickening. The raison d'être for this doctrine was the attainment of grace (and in legend was obligatory for those scouring hither and yon for the Holy Grail) rather than an enlightened governance of reproductive plugs and bungholes. With these exceptions, the Church did not counsel its followers to imitate its ascetic founder but sagaciously welcomed them to breed as copiously as they could.

In another orbit from the theologies of either Gnosticism or Catholicism, the nineteenth-century German philosopher Philipp Mainländer (born Phillip Batz) also envisaged non-coital existence as the surest path to redemption for the sin of being congregants of this world. Our extinction, however, would not be the outcome of an unnatural chastity, but would be a naturally occurring phenomenon once we had evolved far enough to apprehend our existence as so hopelessly pointless and unsatisfactory that we would no longer be subject to generative promptings. Paradoxically, this evolution toward life-sickness would be promoted by a mounting happiness among us. This happiness would be quickened by our following Mainländer's evangelical guidelines for achieving such things as universal justice and charity. Only by securing every good that could be gotten in life, Mainländer figured, could we know that they were not as good as nonexistence.

While the abolishment of human life would be sufficient for the average pessimist, the terminal stage of Mainländer's wishful thought was the full summoning of a "Will-to-die" that by his deduction resided in all matter across the universe. Mainländer diagrammed this brainstorm, along with others as riveting, in a treatise whose title has been translated into English as *The Philosophy of Redemption* (1876). Unsurprisingly, the work never set the philosophical world ablaze. Perhaps the author might have garnered greater celebrity if, like the Austrian philosopher Otto Weininger in his infamous study translated as *Sex and Character* (1903), he had devoted himself to gripping ruminations on male and female matters rather than the redemptive disappearance of everyone regardless of gender.[4]

As one who had a special plan for the human race, Mainländer was not a modest thinker. "We are not everyday people," he once wrote in the royal third-person, "and must pay dearly for dining at the table of the gods." To top it off, suicide ran in his family. On the day his *Philosophy of Redemption* was published, Mainländer killed himself, possibly in a fit of megalomania but just as possibly in surrender to the extinction that for him was so attractive and that he avouched for a most esoteric reason—Deicide.

Mainländer was confident that the Will-to-die he believed would well up in humanity had been spiritually grafted into us by a God who, in the beginning, masterminded His own quietus. It seems that existence was a horror to God. Unfortunately, God was impervious to the depredations of time. This being so, His only means to get free of Himself was by a divine form of suicide.

God's plan to suicide himself could not work, though, as long as He existed as a unified entity outside of space-time and matter. Seeking to nullify His oneness so that He could be delivered into nothingness, he shattered Himself—Big Bang-like—into the time-bound fragments of the universe, that is, all those objects and organisms that have been accumulating here and there for billions of years. In Mainländer's philosophy, "God knew that he could change from a state of

super-reality into non-being only through the development of a real world of multiformity." Employing this strategy, He excluded Himself from being. "God is dead," wrote Mainländer, "and His death was the life of the world." Once the great individuation had been initiated, the momentum of its creator's self-annihilation would continue until everything became exhausted by its own existence, which for human beings meant that the faster they learned that happiness was not as good as they thought it would be, the happier they would be to die out.

So: The Will-to-live that Schopenhauer argued activates the world to its torment was revised by his disciple Mainländer not only as evidence of a tortured life within living beings, but also as a cover for a clandestine will in all things to burn themselves out as hastily as possible in the fires of becoming. In this light, human progress is shown to be an ironic symptom that our downfall into extinction has been progressing nicely, because the more things change for the better, the more they progress toward a reliable end. And those who committed suicide, as did Mainländer, would only be forwarding God's blueprint for bringing an end to His Creation. Naturally, those who replaced themselves by procreation were of no help: "Death is succeeded by the absolute nothing; it is the perfect annihilation of each individual in appearance and being, supposing that by him no child has been begotten or born; for otherwise the individual would live on in that." Mainländer's argument that in the long run nonexistence is superior to existence was cobbled together from his unorthodox interpretation of Christian doctrines and from Buddhism as he understood it.

As the average conscious mortal knows, Christianity and Buddhism are all for leaving this world behind, with their leave-taking being for destinations unknown and impossible to conceive. For Mainländer, these destinations did not exist. His forecast was that one day our will to survive in this life or any other will be universally extinguished by a conscious will to die and stay dead, after the example of the Creator. From the standpoint of Mainländer's philosophy, Zapffe's Last Mes-

siah would not be an unwelcome sage but a crowning force of the post-divine era. Rather than resist our end, as Mainländer concludes, we will come to see that "the knowledge that life is worthless is the flower of all human wisdom." Elsewhere the philosopher states, "Life is hell, and the sweet still night of absolute death is the annihilation of hell."

Inhospitable to rationality as Mainländer's cosmic scenario may seem, it should nonetheless give pause to anyone who is keen to make sense of the universe. Consider this: If something like God exists, or once existed, what would He not be capable of doing, or undoing? Why should God not want to be done with Himself because, unbeknownst to us, suffering was the essence of His being? Why should He not have brought forth a universe that is one great puppet show destined by Him to be crunched or scattered until an absolute nothingness had been established? Why should He fail to see the benefits of nonexistence, as many of His lesser beings have? Revealed scripture there may be that tells a different story. But that does not mean it was revealed by a reliable narrator. Just because He asserted it was all good does not mean he meant what He said. Perhaps He did not want to leave a bad impression by telling us He had absented Himself from the ceremonies before they had begun. Alone and immortal, nothing needed Him. Per Mainländer, though, He needed to bust out into a universe to complete His project of self-extinction, passing on His horror piecemeal, so to say, to His creation.

Mainländer's first philosophy, and last, is in fact no odder than any religious or secular ethos that presupposes the worth of human life. Both are objectively insupportable and irrational. Mainländer was a pessimist, and, just as with any optimist, he needed something to support his gut feeling about being alive. No one has yet conceived an authoritative reason for why the human race should continue or discontinue its being, although some believe they have. Mainländer was sure he had an answer to what he judged to be the worthlessness and pain of existence, and none may peremptorily belie it. Ontologically, Mainländer's thought is delirious;

metaphorically, it explains a good deal about human experience; practically, it may in time prove to be consistent with the idea of creation as a structure of creaking bones being eaten from within by a pestilent marrow.

That there is redemption to be found in an ecumenical nonexistence is an old idea on which Mainländer put a new face. For some it is a cherished idea, like that of a peaceful afterlife or progress toward perfection in this life. The need for such ideas comes out of the fact that existence is a condition with no redeeming qualities. If this were not so, none would need cherished ideas like an ecumenical nonexistence, a peaceful afterlife, or progress toward perfection in this life.[5]

Self-Hypnosis

Among the unpleasantries of human existence is the abashment we suffer when we feel our lives to be destitute of meaning with respect to who we are, what we do, and the general way we believe things to be in the universe. If one doubts that felt meanings are imperative to our developing or maintaining a state of good feeling, just lay your eyes on the staggering number of books and therapies for a market of individuals who suffer from a deficiency of meaning, either in a limited and localized variant ("I am satisfied that my life has meaning because I received an 'A' on my calculus exam") or one that is macrocosmic in scope ("I am satisfied that my life has meaning because God loves me"). Few are the readers of Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952) who do not feel dissatisfied with who they are, what they do, and the general way they believe things to be in the universe. Millions of copies of Peale's book and its imitations have been sold; and they are not purchased by readers well satisfied with the number or intensity of felt meanings in their lives and thus with their place on the ladder of "subjective well being," in the vernacular of positive psychology, a movement that came into its own in the early years of the twenty-first century with a spate of books about how almost anyone could lead happily meaningful lives.[6] Martin Seligman, the architect of positive psychology, defines his brainchild as "the

science of what makes life worth living" and synopsized its principles in *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment* (2002).

There is nothing new, of course, about people searching for a happily meaningful life in a book. With the exception of sacred texts, possibly the most successful self-help manual of all time is Emile Coué's *Self Mastery through Conscious Autosuggestion* (1922). Coué was an advocate of self-hypnosis, and there is little doubt that he had an authentically philanthropic desire to help others lead more salutary lives. On his lecture tours, he was greeted by celebrities and dignitaries around the world. Hordes turned out for his funeral in 1926.

Coué is best known for urging believers in his method to repeat the following sentence: "Day by day, in every way, I am getting better and better." How could his readers not feel that their lives had meaning, or were proceeding toward meaningfulness, by hypnotizing themselves with these words day by day? While being alive is all right for the world's general population, some of us need to get it in writing that this is so.

Every other creature in the world is insensate to meaning. But those of us on the high ground of evolution are replete with this unnatural need which any comprehensive encyclopedia of philosophy treats under the heading LIFE, THE MEANING OF. In its quest for a sense of meaning, humanity has given countless answers to questions that were never posed to it. But though our appetite for meaning may be appeased for a time, we are deceived if we think it is ever gone for good. Years may pass during which we are unmolested by LIFE, THE MEANING OF. Some days we wake up and innocently say, "It's good to be alive." Broken down, this exclamation means that we are experiencing an acute sense of well-being. If everyone were in such elevated spirits all the time, the topic of LIFE, THE MEANING OF would never enter our minds or our philosophical reference books. But an ungrounded jubilation—or even a neutral reading on the monitor of our moods—must lapse, either intermittently or for the rest of our natural lives. Our consciousness, having snoozed

awhile in the garden of incuriosity, is pricked by some thorn or other, perhaps DEATH, THE MEANING OF, or spontaneously modulates to a minor key due to the vagaries of our brain chemistry, the weather, or for causes not confirmable. Then the hunger returns for LIFE, THE MEANING OF, the emptiness must be filled again, the pursuit resumed. (There is more on meaning in the section *Unpersons* contained in the next chapter, "Who Goes There?")

Perhaps we might gain some perspective on our earthly term if we stopped thinking of ourselves as beings who enact a "life." This word is loaded with connotations to which it has no right. Instead, we should substitute "existence" for "life" and forget about how well or badly we enact it. None of us "has a life" in the narrative-biographical way we think of these words. What we have are so many years of existence. It would not occur to us to say that any man or woman is in the "prime of existence." Speaking of "existence" rather than "life" unclothes the latter word of its mystique. Who would ever claim that "existence is all right, especially when you consider the alternative"?

Cosmophobia

As heretofore noted, consciousness may have assisted our species' survival in the hard times of prehistory, but as it became ever more intense it evolved the potential to ruin everything if not securely muzzled. This is the problem: We must either outsmart consciousness or be thrown into its vortex of doleful factuality and suffer, as Zapffe termed it, a "dread of being"—not only of our own being but of being itself, the idea that the vacancy that might otherwise have obtained is occupied like a stall in a public lavatory of infinite dimensions, that there is a universe in which things like celestial bodies and human beings are roving about, that anything exists in the way it seems to exist, that we are part of all being until we stop being, if there is anything we may understand as being other than semblances or the appearance of semblances.

On the premise that consciousness must be obfuscated so that we might go on as we have all these years, Zapffe inferred that the sensible thing would be not to go on with the paradoxical nonsense of trying to inhibit our cardinal attribute as beings, since we can tolerate existence only if we believe—in accord with a complex of illusions, a legerdemain of duplicity—that we are not what we are: unreality on legs. As conscious beings, we must hold back that divulgement lest it break us with a sense of being things without significance or foundation, anatomies shackled to a landscape of unintelligible horrors. In plain language, we cannot live except as self-deceivers who must lie to ourselves about ourselves, as well as about our unwinnable situation in this world.[7]

Accepting the preceding statements as containing some truth, or at least for the sake of moving on with the present narrative, it seems that we are zealots of Zapffe's four plans for smothering consciousness: isolation ("Being alive is all right"), anchoring ("One Nation under God with Families, Morality, and Natural Birthrights for all"), distraction ("Better to kill time than kill oneself"), and sublimation ("I am writing a book titled *The Conspiracy against the Human Race*"). These practices make us organisms with a nimble intellect that can deceive themselves "for their own good." Isolation, anchoring, distraction, and sublimation are among the wiles we use to keep ourselves from dispelling every illusion that keeps us up and running. Without this cognitive double-dealing, we would be exposed for what we are. It would be like looking into a mirror and for a moment seeing the skull inside our skin looking back at us with its sardonic smile. And beneath the skull—only blackness, nothing. Someone is there, so we feel, and yet no one is there—the uncanny paradox, all the horror in a glimpse. A little piece of our world has been peeled back, and underneath is creaking desolation—a carnival where all the rides are moving but no patrons occupy the seats. We are missing from the world we have made for ourselves. Maybe if we could resolutely gaze wide-eyed at our lives we would come to know what we really are. But that

would stop the showy attraction we are inclined to think will run forever.[8]

Pessimism I

Along with every other tendentious mindset, pessimism may be construed as a fluke of temperament, a shifty word that will just have to do until a better one comes along. Without the temperament that was given to them in large portion, pessimists would not see existence as basically undesirable. Optimists may have fugitive doubts about the basic desirability of existence, but pessimists never doubt that existence is basically undesirable. If you interrupted them in the middle of an ecstatic moment, which pessimists do have, and asked if existence is basically undesirable, they would reply "Of course" before returning to their ecstasy. Why they should answer in this way is a closed book. The conclusions to which temperament lead an individual, whether or not they are conclusions refractory to those of world society, are simply not subject to analysis.

Composed of the same dross as all mortals, the pessimist cleaves to whatever seems to validate his thoughts and emotions. Scarce among us are those who not only want to think they are right, but also expect others to affirm their least notion as unassailable. Pessimists are no exception. But they are few and do not show up on the radar of our race. Immune to the blandishments of religions, countries, families, and everything else that puts both average and above-average citizens in the limelight, pessimists are sideliners in both history and the media. Without belief in gods or ghosts, unmotivated by a comprehensive delusion, they could never plant a bomb, plan a revolution, or shed blood for a cause.

Identical with religions that ask of their believers more than they can possibly make good on, pessimism is a set of ideals that none can follow to the letter. Those who indict a pessimist of either pathology or intellectual recalcitrance are only faking their competence to explain what cannot be explained: the mystery of why individuals are the way they are.

To some extent, however, why some individuals are the way they are is not a full-fledged mystery. There are traits that run in families—legacies lurking in the genes of one generation that may profit or impair those of another. Philosophical pessimism has been called a maladaptation by those who are concerned with such things. This call seems indisputably correct. The possibility must be considered, then, that there is a genetic marker for philosophical pessimism that nature has all but deselected from our race so that we may keep on living as we have all these years. Allowing for the theory that pessimism is weakly hereditary, and is getting weaker all the time because it is maladaptive, the genes that make up the fiber of ordinary folk may someday celebrate an everlasting triumph over those of the congenitally pessimistic, ridding nature of all worry that its protocol of survival and reproduction for its most conscious species will be challenged—unless Zapffe is right and consciousness itself is maladaptive, making philosophical pessimism the correct call despite its unpopularity among those who think, or say they think, that being alive is all right. But psycho-biographers do not often take what is adaptive or maladaptive for our species into account when writing of a chosen member of the questionably dying breed of pessimists. To them, their subject's temperament has a twofold inception: (1) life stories of tribulation, even though the pessimistic caste has no sorrows exclusive to it; (2) intractable wrongheadedness, a charge that pessimists could turn against optimists if the *argumentum ad populum* were not the world's favorite fallacy.

The major part of our species seems able to undergo any trauma without significantly re-examining its household mantras, including "everything happens for a reason," "the show must go on," "accept the things you cannot change," and any other adage that gets people to keep their chins up. But pessimists cannot give themselves over to this program, and its catchwords stick in their throats. To them, the Creation is objectionable and useless on principle—the worst possible dispatch of bad news. It seems so bad, so wrong,

that, should such authority be unwisely placed into their hands, they would make it a prosecutable malfeasance to produce a being who might turn out to be a pessimist.

Disenfranchised by nature, pessimists feel that they have been impressed into this world by the reproductive liberty of positive thinkers who are ever-thoughtful of the future. At whatever point in time one is situated, the future always looks better than the present, just as the present looks better than the past. No one today would write, as did the British essayist Thomas De Quincey in the early nineteenth century: "A quarter of man's misery is toothache." Knowing what we know of the progress toward the alleviation of human misery throughout history, who would damn their children to have a piteous toothache in the early nineteenth century, or in times before it, back to the days when *Homo sapiens* with toothaches scrounged to feed themselves and shivered in the cold? To the regret of pessimists, our primitive ancestors could not see that theirs was not a time in which to produce children.

So at what time was it that people knew enough to say, "*This* is the time in which to produce children"? When did we think that enough progress had been made toward the alleviation of human misery that children could be produced without our being torn by a crisis of conscience? The easy years of the Pharaohs and Western antiquity? The lazy days of the Dark Ages? The palmy decades of the Industrial Revolution as well as the other industry-driven periods that followed? The breakthrough era in which advancements in dentistry allayed humanity of one-quarter of its misery?

But few or none have ever had a crisis of conscience about producing children, because all children have been born at the best *possible* time in human history, or at least the one in which the most progress toward the alleviation of human misery has been made, which is always the time in which we live and have lived. While we have always looked back on previous times and thought that their progress toward the alleviation of human misery was not enough for us to want to live then, we do not know any better than the earliest *Homo*

sapiens about what progress toward the alleviation of human misery will be made in the future, reasonably presuming that such progress will be made. And even though we may speculate about that progress, we feel no resentment about not being able to take advantage of it, or not many of us do. Nor will those of the future resent not living in the world of *their* future because even greater progress toward the alleviation of human misery will by then have been made in medicine, social conditions, political arrangements, and other areas that are almost universally regarded as domains in which human life could be better.

Will there ever be an end of the line in our progress toward the alleviation of human misery when people can honestly say, "This is without doubt the time produce children"? And will that really be the time? No one would say, or even want to think that theirs is a time in which people will look back on them from the future and thank their stars that they did not live in such a barbaric age that had made so little progress toward the alleviation of human misery and still produced children. As if anyone ever cared or will ever care, this is what the pessimist would say: "There has never been and never will be a time in which to produce children. *Now* will forever be a bad time for doing that." Moreover, the pessimist would advise each of us not to look too far into the future or we will see the reproachful faces of the unborn looking back at us from the radiant mist of their nonexistence.

Pessimism II

In his lengthy study *Pessimism* (1877), James Sully wrote that "a just and correct estimate of life is to be looked for" in "views … which lean neither to the favourable nor the unfavourable pole." By this claim, Sully erred in his otherwise able dissection of his subject. People are either pessimists or optimists. They forcefully "lean" one way or the other, and there is no common ground between them. For pessimists, life is something that should not be, which means that what they believe *should be* is the absence of life, nothing, non-being, the emptiness of the uncreated. Anyone who speaks up for

life as something that irrefutably should be—that we would *not* be better off unborn, extinct, or forever lazing in nonexistence—is an optimist. It is all or nothing; one is in or one is out, abstractly speaking. Practically speaking, we have been a race of optimists since the nascency of human consciousness and lean like mad toward the favorable pole.

More stylish in his examination of pessimism than Sully is the American novelist and part-time philosopher Edgar Saltus, whose *Philosophy of Disenchantment* (1885) and *The Anatomy of Negation* (1886) were written for those who treasure philosophical and literary works of a pessimistic, nihilistic, or defeatist nature as indispensable to their existence. In Saltus's estimation, a "just and correct view of human life" would justly and correctly determine human life as that which should not be.

Controverting the absolutist standards of pessimism and optimism as outlined above are "heroic" pessimists, or rather heroic "pessimists." These are self-styled pessimists who take into consideration Sully's unfavorable pole but are not committed to its entailment that life is something that should not be. In his *Tragic Sense of Life in Men and Nations* (1913), the Spanish writer Miguel de Unamuno speaks of consciousness as a disease bred by a conflict between the rational and the irrational. The rational is identified with the conclusions of consciousness, primarily that we will all die. The irrational represents all that is vital in humanity, including a universal desire for immortality in either a physical or nonphysical state. The coexistence of the rational and the irrational turns the human experience into a wrangle of contradictions to which we can bow our heads in resignation or defy as heroes of futility. Unamuno's penchant was for the heroic course, with the implied precondition that one has the physical and psychological spunk for the fight. In line with Unamuno, Joshua Foa Dienstag, author of *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit* (2006), is also a proselytizer for a healthy, heroic pessimism (quotes implied) that faces up to much of the dispiriting lowdown on life, all radically pessimistic visions being cropped out of the picture, and marches on toward a future

believed to be personally and politically workable. Also siding with this never-say-die group is William R. Brashear, whose *The Desolation of Reality* (1995) concludes with a format for redemption, however partial and imperfect, by holding tight to what he calls "tragic humanism," which recognizes human life's "ostensible insignificance, but also the necessity of proceeding as if this were not so, … willfully nourishing and sustaining the underlying illusions of value and order." How we nourish and sustain illusions of value and order in our lives is explained in Zapffe's "The Last Messiah." How we might nourish and sustain *at will* what we know to be illusions without a covenant of ignominious pretense among us is not explained by Brashear and has never been explained by anyone else who espouses this *façon de vivre.* Not in the same class of pessimism as the anti-natalist Zapffe—Unamuno, Dienstag, and Brashear meet existence more than halfway, safely joined in solidarity with both ordinary and sophisticated folk, who take their lumps like grown-ups and by doing so retain their status with the status quo. Attuned as they may be to the pessimist's attitude that life is something which should not be, they do not approve of it. But Unamuno, Dienstag, and Brashear's solution to the pessimist's rejection of life puts us in the same paradoxical bind that Zapffe sees in human existence, that is, living with the pretense that being alive is all right. The only difference is that Unamuno, Dienstag, and Brashear knowingly accede to a pretense that ordinary folk shirk knowing, at least as a general rule, because even average mortals are sometimes forced to admit this pretense—they just do not linger over it long enough to make it a philosophical point of pride and sing their own praises for doing so.

A philosophical cohort of Unamuno, Dienstag, and Brashear is the French existentialist writer Albert Camus. In his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Camus represents the unattainable goal of the title figure as an apologetic for going on with life rather than ending it. As he insists in his discussion of this gruesome parable, "We must imagine Sisyphus as happy" as he rolls his boulder to the top of mountain from

which it always tumbles down again and again and again to his despair. The credo of the Church Father Tertullian, "I believe because it is absurd," might justly be placed in the context of Camus's belief that being alive is all right, or all right enough, though it may be absurd. Indeed, the connection has not been overlooked. Caught between the irrationality of the Carthaginian and the intellectuality of the Frenchman, Zapffe's proposal that we put out the light of the human race extends to us an antidote for our existential infirmities that is infinitely more satisfying than that of either Tertullian or his avatar Camus, the latter of whom meditated on suicide as a philosophical issue for the individual yet did not entertain the advantages of an all-out attrition of the species. By not doing so, one might conclude that Camus was only being practical. In the end, though, his insistence that we *must* imagine Sisyphus as happy is as impractical as it is feculent. Like Unamuno, Dienstag, and Brashear, Camus believed we can *assume* a view of life that can content us with the tragedy, nightmare, and meaninglessness of human existence. Camus may have been able to assume this view of life before his life ended in a vehicular misadventure, but he *must* have been jesting to pose it as a possibility or a duty for the world.

It would be a sign of callowness to bemoan the fact that pessimistic writers do not rate and may be reprehended in both good conscience and good company. Some critics of the pessimist often think they have his back to the wall when they blithely jeer, "If that is how this fellow feels, he should either kill himself or be decried as a hypocrite." That the pessimist should kill himself in order to live up to his ideas may be counterattacked as betraying such a crass intellect that it does not deserve a response. Yet it is not much of a chore to produce one. Simply because someone has reached the conclusion that the amount of suffering in this world is enough that anyone would be better off never having been born does not mean that by force of logic or sincerity he must kill himself. It only means he has concluded that the amount of suffering in this world is enough that anyone would be better off

never having been born. Others may disagree on this point as it pleases them, but they must accept that if they believe themselves to have a stronger case than the pessimist, then they are mistaken.

Naturally, there are pessimists who do kill themselves, but nothing obliges them to kill themselves or live with the mark of the hypocrite on their brow. Voluntary death might seem a thoroughly negative course of action, but it is not as simple as that. Every negation is adulterated or stealthily launched by an affirmative spirit. An unequivocal "no" cannot be uttered or acted upon. Lucifer's last words in heaven may have been "Non serviam," but none has served the Almighty so dutifully, since His sideshow in the clouds would never draw any customers if it were not for the main attraction of the devil's hell on earth. Only catatonics and coma patients can persevere in a dignified withdrawal from life's rattle and hum. Without a "yes" in our hearts, nothing would be done. And to be done with our existence en masse would be the most ambitious affirmation of all.

Most people think that vitality is betokened only by such phenomena as people in their eighties who hike mountain trails or nations that build empires. This way of thinking is simply naïve, but it keeps up our morale because we like to imagine we will be able to hike mountain trails when we are in our eighties or live as citizens of a nation that has built an empire. And so the denunciations of critics who say the pessimist should kill himself or be decried as a hypocrite make every kind of sense in a world of card-carrying or crypto optimists. Once this is understood, the pessimist can spare himself from suffering more than he need at the hands of "normal people," a confederation of upstanding creatures who in concert keep the conspiracy going. This is not to say that such individuals do not suffer so much and in such a way that they sometimes kill themselves, possibly even more per capita than do pessimists, or that because they kill themselves they are hypocrites for ever having said that anyone is better off for having been born. It is only to say that when normal indi-

viduals kill themselves, even after having said that anyone is better off for having been born, they are disqualified as normal individuals, because normal individuals do not kill themselves but until their dying day think that being alive is all right and that happiness will stand out in the existence of life's newcomers, who, it is always assumed, will be as normal as they are.

Blundering

Consciousness is an existential liability, as every pessimist agrees—a blunder of blind nature, according to Zapffe, that has taken humankind down a black hole of logic. To make it through this life, we must make believe that we are not what we are—contradictory beings whose continuance only worsens our plight as mutants who embody the contorted logic of a paradox. To correct this blunder, we should desist from procreating. What could be more judicious or more urgent, existentially speaking, than our self-administered oblivion? At the very least, we might give some regard to this theory of the blunder as a "thought-experiment." All civilizations become defunct. All species die out. There is even an expiration date on the universe itself. Human beings would certainly not be the first phenomenon to go belly up. But we could be the first to precipitate our own passing, abbreviating it before the bodies really started to stack up. Could we know to their most fine-grained details the lives of all who came before us, would we bless them for the care they took to keep the race blundering along? Could we exhume them alive, would we shake their bony, undead hands and promise to pass on the favor of living to future generations? Surely that is what they would want to hear, or at least that is what we want to think they would want to hear. And just as surely that is what we would want to hear from our descendents living in far posterity, strangers though they would be as they shook our bony, undead hands.

Nature proceeds by blunders; that is its way. It is also ours. So if we have blundered by regarding consciousness as a blun-

der, why make a fuss over it? Our self-removal from this planet would still be a magnificent move, a feat so luminous it would bedim the sun. What do we have to lose? No evil would attend our departure from this world, and the many evils we have known would go extinct along with us. So why put off what would be the most laudable masterstroke of our existence, and the only one?

Of course, phenomena other than consciousness have been thought to be blunders, beginning with life itself. For example, in a novel titled *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936), the American writer H. P. Lovecraft has one of his characters mention a "primal myth" about "Great Old Ones who filtered down from the stars and concocted earth life as a joke or mistake." Schopenhauer, once he had drafted his own mythology that everything in the universe is energized by a Will-to-live, shifted to a commonsense pessimism to represent life as a congeries of excruciations.

> [L]ife presents itself by no means as a gift for enjoyment, but as a task, a drudgery to be performed; and in accordance with this we see, in great and small, universal need, ceaseless cares, constant pressure, endless strife, compulsory activity, with extreme exertion of all the powers of body and mind. Many millions, united into nations, strive for the common good, each individual on account of his own; but many thousands fall as a sacrifice for it. Now senseless delusions, now intriguing politics, incite them to wars with each other; then the sweat and the blood of the great multitude must flow, to carry out the ideas of individuals, or to expiate their faults. In peace industry and trade are active, inventions work miracles, seas are navigated, delicacies are collected from all ends of the world, the waves engulf thousands. All push and drive, others acting; the tumult is indescribable. But the ultimate aim of it all, what is it? To sustain ephemeral and tormented individuals through a short span of time in the most fortunate case with endurable want and comparative freedom from pain, which, however, is at once attended with ennui; then the reproduction of this race and its striving. In this evident disproportion between the trouble and the reward, the will to live appears to us from this point of view, if taken objectively, as a fool, or subjectively, as a delusion, seized by which everything living works with the utmost exertion of its strength for some thing that is of no value. But when we consider it more closely, we shall find here also that it is rather a blind pressure, a tendency entirely without ground or motive. (*The World as Will and Representation,* trans. R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp)

Schopenhauer is here straightforward in limning his awareness that, for human beings, existence is a state of demonic

mania, with the Will-to-live as the possessing spirit of "ephemeral and tormented individuals." Elsewhere in his works, he denominates consciousness as "an accident of life." A blunder. A mistake. Is there really anything behind our smiles and tears but an evolutionary slip-up?

Analogies

Schopenhauer's is a great pessimism, not least because it reveals a signature motif of the pessimistic imagination. As indicated, Schopenhauer's insights are yoked to a philosophical superstructure centered on the Will, or the Will-to-live—a blind, deaf, and dumb force that rouses human beings to their detriment. While Schopenhauer's system of thought is as impossible to swallow as that of any other systematic philosopher, no intelligent person can fail to see that every living thing behaves *exactly* in conformity with his philosophy in its liberal articulation. Wound up like toys by some force—call it Will, élan vital, anima mundi, physiological or psychological processes, nature, or whatever—organisms go on running as they are bidden until they run down. In pessimistic philosophies only the force is real, not the things activated by it. They are only puppets, and if they have consciousness may mistakenly believe they are self-winding persons who are making a go of it on their own.

Here, then, is the signature motif of the pessimistic imagination that Schopenhauer made discernible: *Behind the scenes of life there is something pernicious that makes a nightmare of our world.* For Zapffe, the evolutionary mutation of consciousness tugged us into tragedy. For Michelstaedter, individuals can exist only as unrealities that are made as they are made and that cannot make themselves otherwise because their hands are forced by the "god" of *philopsychia* (self-love) to accept positive illusions about themselves or not accept themselves at all. For Mainländer, a Will-to-die, not Schopenhauer's Will-to-live, plays the occult master pulling our strings, making us dance in fitful motions like marionettes caught in a turbulent wake left by the passing of a self-murdered god. For Bahnsen, a purposeless force breathes a

black life into everything and feasts upon it part by part, regurgitating itself into itself, ever-renewing the throbbing forms of its repast. For all others who suspect that something is amiss in the lifeblood of being, something they cannot verbalize, there are the malformed shades of suffering and death that chase them into the false light of contenting lies.

By analogy with that pernicious something the pessimist senses behind the scenes of life are the baleful agencies that govern the world of supernatural horror fiction. Actually, it would be more proper to speak of the many worlds of supernatural horror, since they vary from author to author as much as the renderings of the human fiasco vary from pessimist to pessimist. Even within the writings of a single author, the source of something pernicious that makes a nightmare of our world switches about, the common link being a state of affairs that overturns our conception of reality for the worse.

In "The Willows," for instance, the twentieth-century British writer Algernon Blackwood suggests that an inimical force abides within nature. What this enormity might be is known to the characters of the story only by mysterious signs and sounds that unnerve them as they make their way in a small boat down the Danube and camp for the night on an island overgrown with willows, which become the symbolic focus of a region where nature shows its most menacing aspect. The narrator tries to explain what it is about the willows that seems particularly threatening to him, as distinct from the more immediate perils of the severe weather conditions that have developed along the Danube.

> A rising river, perhaps, always suggests something of the ominous: many of the little islands I saw before me would probably have been swept away by the morning; this resistless, thundering water touched the deep sense of awe. Yet I was aware that my uneasiness lay deeper far than the emotions of awe and wonder. It was not that I felt. Nor had it directly to do with the power of the driving wind—this shouting hurricane that might almost carry up a few acres of willows into the air and scatter them like so much chaff over the landscape. The wind was simply enjoying itself, for nothing rose out of the flat landscape to stop it, and I was conscious of sharing its great game with a kind of pleasurable excitement. Yet this novel emotion had

> nothing to do with the wind. Indeed, so vague was the sense of distress I experienced, that it was impossible to trace it to its source and deal with it accordingly, though I was aware somehow that it had to do with our utter insignificance before this unrestrained power of the elements about me. The huge-grown river had something to do with it too—a vague, unpleasant idea that we had somehow trifled with these great elemental forces in whose power we lay helpless every hour of the day and night. For here, indeed, they were gigantically at play together, and the sight appealed to the imagination.
>
> But my emotion, so far as I could understand it, seemed to attach itself more particularly to the willow bushes, to these acres and acres of willows, crowding, so thickly growing there, swarming everywhere the eye could reach, pressing upon the river as though to suffocate it, standing in dense array mile after mile beneath the sky, watching, waiting, listening. And, apart from the elements, the willows connected themselves subtly with my malaise, attacking the mind insidiously somehow by reason of their vast numbers, and contriving in some way or other to represent to the imagination a new and mighty power, a power, moreover, not altogether friendly to us.

The mystery of the pernicious something that the willows represent is never resolved. However, at the end of the story the two travelers see a man turning over and over in the rushing river. And he bears "their mark" in the form of indentations they had seen before in the sands of the island—funnels that formed and grew in size throughout the night the men had camped on the island. Whatever power that was not "altogether friendly to us" had procured its victim and satisfied itself. The men had been saved at the price of another's death. That which makes a nightmare of our world had revealed itself for a time and withdrawn once again behind the scenes of life.

Such is the motif of supernatural horror: Something terrible in its being comes forward and makes its claim as a shareholder in our reality, or what we think is our reality and ours alone. It may be an emissary from the grave or an esoteric monstrosity, as in the ghost stories of M. R. James. It may be the offspring of a scientific experiment with unintended consequences, as in Arthur Machen's "The Great God Pan," or the hitherto unheard-of beings in the same author's "The White People." It may be a hideous token of another dimension revealed only in a mythic tome, as in Robert W. Chambers' "The Yellow Sign." Or it may be a world unto itself of pure morbid-

ity, one suffused with a profound sense of a doom without a name—Edgar Allan Poe's world.

Reflected in the works of many supernatural writers, the signature motif Schopenhauer made discernible in pessimism was most consistently promulgated by Lovecraft, a paragon among literary figures who have thought the unthinkable, or at least thought what most mortals do not want to think. In conceiving Azathoth, that "nuclear chaos" which "bubbles at the center of all infinity," Lovecraft might well have been thinking of Schopenhauer's Will. As instantiated in Lovecraft's stories, the pernicious something that makes a nightmare of our world is individuated into linguistically teratological entities from beyond or outside of our universe. Like ghosts or the undead, their very existence spooks us as a violation of what should and should not be, suggesting unknown modes of being and uncanny creations which epitomize supernatural horror.

Life-Principles

Philosophically, Lovecraft was a dyed-in-the-wool scientific materialist. Nevertheless, he is a felicitous example of someone who knew ravishments that in another context would qualify as "spiritual" or "religious." Yet from childhood he adhered to a vigorous atheism. In his lectures collected as *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), William James proposes that a sense of "ontological wonder" and "cosmic emotion" argues for the legitimacy of religious faith. In both his creative writings and his letters, Lovecraft's expression of the feelings James describes form an exception to the philosopher-psychologist's argument.[9] For Lovecraft, cosmic wonder and a "tranquility tinged with terror," as the British political theorist and aesthetician Edmund Burke referred to such experiences, were basic to his interest in remaining alive. Sublimating his awareness of the universe as *nothingness in motion,* he also mitigated the boredom that plagued his life by distracting himself with reveries of *"surprise, discovery, strangeness, and the impingement of the cosmic, lawless, and*

mystical upon the prosaic sphere of the known" (Lovecraft's emphasis).

From the other side of an emotional and spiritual chasm, the French scientist and Christian philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote of his a sense of being "engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces whereof I know nothing, and which know nothing of me; I am terrified. The eternal silence of these infinite spaces fills me with dread" (*Pensées,* 1670). Pascal's is not an unnatural reaction for those phobic to infinite spaces that know nothing of them. "Kenophobia" is the fear of such vast spaces and voids. Perhaps keno*philia* should be coined to describe the "ontological wonder" and "cosmic emotion" Lovecraft felt when he contemplated the outer rim of the unknown.

A complex and contradictory figure, as illustrated above, Lovecraft often seemed to be on the fence when it came to his convictions about the value of existence. In a letter to Edwin Baird, the first editor of *Weird Tales,* he penned some remarks that express a univocal stand by a pessimist who is estranged from all solace known to ordinary folk. These merit quotation at length.

> Popular authors do not and apparently cannot appreciate the fact that true art is obtainable only by rejecting normality and conventionality in toto, and approaching a theme purged utterly of any usual or preconceived point of view. Wild and "different" as they may consider their quasi-weird products, it remains a fact that the bizarrerie is on the surface alone; and that basically they reiterate the same old conventional values and motives and perspectives. Good and evil, teleological illusion, sugary sentiment, anthropocentric psychology—the usual superficial stock in trade, and all shot through with the eternal and inescapable commonplace.... Who ever wrote a story from the point of view that man is a blemish on the cosmos, who ought to be eradicated? As an example—a young man I know lately told me that he means to write a story about a scientist who wishes to dominate the earth, and who to accomplish his ends trains and overdevelops germs ... and leads armies of them in the manner of the Egyptian plagues. I told him that although this theme has promise, it is made utterly commonplace by assigning the scientist a normal motive. There is nothing outré about wanting to conquer the earth; Alexander, Napoleon, and Wilhelm II wanted to do that. Instead, I told my friend, he should conceive a man with a morbid, frantic, shuddering hatred of the life-principle itself, who wishes to extirpate from the planet every trace of biological organism, animal and vegetable alike, including himself. That would be tolerably original. But after all, originality lies with the author. One can't write a weird story of real power without per-

> fect psychological detachment from the human scene, and a magic prism of imagination which suffuses theme and style alike with that grotesquerie and disquieting distortion characteristic of morbid vision. Only a cynic can create horror—for behind every masterpiece of the sort must reside a driving demonic force that despises the human race and its illusions, and longs to pull them to pieces and mock them.

The salient interest of this letter is that it shows Lovecraft as a perfectionist of cosmic disillusion. But relatively dissociated from Lovecraft the cosmic disillusionist was another Lovecraft, one who reveled in protectionist illusions that could not be more alien to the propensities of his alter ego. In this latter identity, he took refuge from what he specified as his cynicism (also "cosmic pessimism") in a world of distractions and anchorings he had amassed over the years. Among them was his sentimental immersion in the past. Especially dear to him was the traditional way of life emblemized by architectural remnants of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century New England. Old towns with winding streets, houses with semicircular fanlight doors, and other postcard images of Yankeedom conjured up for Lovecraft a picture of bygone times as an aesthetic phenomenon that often tailed into a Blood-and-Soil mysticism. A proud Novanglian, Lovecraft grew up and lived among abundant reminders of a past he idealized. His attachment to historic New England counterbalanced his infatuation with the far reaches of time and space, beside which, as he well knew, the outdated culture-streams that so enraptured him were local, fleeting, and accidental forms without immanent virtue. For Lovecraft, both quaint small-paned windows and a bracing alienage from human mores had charms that he heartily honored in his works as well as his life, even during his darkest days of cynicism and pessimism.

Like most of us, Lovecraft distracted himself with fabricated values, and he did so until death was bestowed upon him by a combination of intestinal cancer and Bright's disease. Concerned as a fiction writer with smashing to bits humanity's grand illusion about its place in the universe, Lovecraft welcomed any illusions he could accept in good faith, as did Zapffe and Schopenhauer, who also pursued gratifying di-

versions that took their minds off what the latter philosopher called the "vanity and suffering of life." During his later years, Lovecraft did seem to mellow considerably as he walked the plank into nonexistence. In letters to his friends and colleagues he attested that he had left his cynicism and pessimism behind and had become an "indifferentist," meaning one who sees no malice in the physical universe but only a flux of particles. To the benefit of supernatural horror aficionados, Lovecraft's indifferentist philosophy did not require him to discontinue writing about pernicious things that compromise the sanity of anyone who learns of their existence. Lovecraft was exhilarated by the idea of something pernicious that made a nightmare of our world, whether it was indifferent to us or quite partial to our devastation. In his indifferentism, Lovecraft did not seem to have shambled far from the cognitive-style of the individual who advised his friend to write about "a man with a morbid, frantic, shuddering hatred of the life-principle itself, who wishes to extirpate from the planet every trace of biological organism, animal and vegetable alike, including himself." If only there were a man who could bring to fruition such a wish. Then the earth could finally be "cleared off," as Wilbur Whately wrote in his diary in "The Dunwich Horror."

Why anyone should be drawn to the writings of Lovecraft and his confederates is usually expounded as a natural aspect of the human temper, a healthy yearning of our souls to exceed the bounds of ordinary existence. In his lecture "On Morbidity," part of a series of brief expositions on supernatural horror, an academician known only as Professor Nobody (an ostentatiously cocky pseudonym) submits his analysis of an atypical individual who does not partake in the wholesome motivation of the majority with respect to the horrific and extraordinary, "a man with a morbid, frantic, shuddering hatred of the life-principle itself." While there is indeed something invigorating in supernatural horror for this individual, it is a negative rather than a positive activation that pleasures him by its antipathy to all that lives. The floor is now ceded to the professor.

Isolation, mental strain, emotional exertions, visionary infatuations, well-executed fevers, repudiations of well-being: only a few of the many exercises practiced by that specimen we shall call the "morbid man." And our subject of supernatural horror is a vital part of his program. Retreating from a world of heath and sanity, or at least one that daily invests in such commodities, the morbid man seeks the shadows behind the scenes of life. He backs himself into a corner alive with cool drafts and fragrant with centuries of must. It is in that corner that he builds a world of ruins out the battered stones of his imagination, a rancid world rife with things smelling of the crypt.

But this world is not all a romantic sanctum for the dark in spirit. So let us condemn it for a moment, this deep-end of dejection. Though there is no name for what might be called the morbid man's "sin," it still seems in violation of some deeply ingrained morality. The morbid man does not appear to be doing himself or others any good. And while we all know that melancholic moping and lugubrious ruminating are quite palatable as side-dishes of existence, he has turned them into a house specialty! Ultimately, however, he may meet this charge of wrongdoing with a simple "What of it?"

Now, such a response assumes morbidity to be a certain class of vice, one to be pursued without apology, and one whose advantages and disadvantages must be enjoyed or endured *outside the law.* But as a sower of vice, if only in his own soul, the morbid man incurs the following censure: that he is a symptom or a cause of decay within both individual and collective spheres of being. And decay, like every other process of becoming, hurts everybody. "Good!" shouts the morbid man. "No good!" counters the crowd. Both positions betray dubious origins: one in resentment, the other in fear. And when the moral debate on this issue eventually reaches an impasse or becomes too tangled for truth, then psychological polemics can begin. Later on we will find other angles from which this problem may be attacked, enough to keep us occupied for the rest of our lives.

Meanwhile, the morbid man keeps putting his *time on earth* to no good use, until in the end—amidst mad winds, wan moonlight, and pasty specters—he uses his exactly like everyone else uses theirs: all up.

Undoing III

When people are asked to respond to the statement "I am happy—true or false," the word "true" is spoken more often than "false," overwhelmingly so. If there is some loss of face in confessing that one is not happy, this does not mean that those who profess happiness as their dominant humor are lying through their teeth. People want to be happy. They believe they should be happy. And if some philosopher says they can never be happy because their consciousness has ensured their unhappiness, that philosopher will not be part of the dialogue, especially if he blathers about discontinuing our species by ceasing to bear children who can also never be

happy even though, to extend the point, they can also never be unhappy given their inexperience of existing. Ask Zapffe.

> So you ask whether I would choose to be unborn? One must be born in order to choose, and the choice involves destruction. But ask my brother in that chair over there. Indeed, it is an empty one; my brother did not get so far. Yet ask him, as he is traveling like the wind below the sky, crashing against the beach, scenting in the grass, reveling in his strength as he pursues his living food. Do you think he is bereaved by his incapacity to fulfill his fate on the waiting list of the Oslo Housing and Savings Society? And have *you* ever missed *him?* Look around in a crowded afternoon tram and reflect whether you would allow a lottery to select one of the exhausted toilers as the one whom you put into this world. They pay no attention as one person gets off and two get on. The tram keeps rolling along. ("Fragments of an Interview," *Aftenposten,* 1959)

The point that in the absence of birth nobody exists who can be deprived of happiness is terribly conspicuous. For optimists, this fact plays no part in their existential computations. For pessimists, however, it is axiomatic. Whether a pessimist urges us to live "heroically" with a knife in our gut or denounces life as not worth living is immaterial. What matters is that he makes no bones about *hurt* being the Great Problem it is incumbent on philosophy to observe. But this problem can be solved only by establishing an imbalance between hurt and happiness that would enable us in principle to say which is more desirable—existence or nonexistence. While no airtight case has ever been made regarding the undesirability of human life, pessimists still run themselves ragged trying to make one. Optimists have no comparable mission. When they do argue for the desirability of human life it is only in reaction to pessimists arguing the opposite, even though no airtight case has ever been made regarding that desirability. Optimism has always been an undeclared policy of human culture—one that grew out of our animal instincts to survive and reproduce—rather than an articulated body of thought. It is the default condition of our blood and cannot be effectively questioned by our minds or put in grave doubt by our pains. This would explain why at any given time there are more cannibals than philosophical pessimists.

For optimists, human life never needs justification, no matter how much hurt piles up, because they can always tell themselves that things will get better. For pessimists, there is no amount of happiness—should such a thing as happiness even obtain for human beings except as a misconception—that can compensate us for life's hurt. As a worst-case example, a pessimist might refer to the hurt caused by some natural or human-made cataclysm. To adduce a hedonic counterpart to the horrors that attach to such cataclysms would require a degree of ingenuity from an optimist, but it could be done. And the reason it could be done, the reason for the eternal stalemate between optimists and pessimists, is that no possible formula can be established to measure proportions and types of hurt and happiness in the world. If such a formula could be established, then either pessimists or optimists would have to give in to their adversaries.

One formula to establish the imbalance at issue has been tendered by the South African philosopher of ethics David Benatar. In his *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (2006), Benatar cogently propounds that, because some amount of suffering is inevitable for all who are born, while the absence of happiness does not deprive those who would have been born but were not, the scales are tipped in favor of not bearing children. Therefore, propagators violate any conceivable system of morality and ethics because they are guilty of doing harm. To Benatar, the extent of the harm that always occurs matters not. Once harm has been ensured by the begetting of a bundle of joy, a line has been crossed from moral-ethical behavior to immoral-unethical behavior. This violation of morality and ethics holds for Benatar in all instances of childbirth.

People like Benatar who argue that the world's "ideal population size is zero" are written off as being unhealthy of mind. Further accentuating this presumed unhealthiness is Benatar's argument that giving birth is not only harmful but should be seen as so egregiously harmful that there is no happiness that can counterbalance it. As harms go in this world, there are none worse than the harm that entails all others.

Ask William James for a perspective on one of those great harms—to which he gives the name "melancholy"—and how it is generally passed over in the lives of healthy adults.

> The method of averting one's attention from evil, and living simply in the light of good is splendid as long as it will work. It will work with many persons; it will work far more generally than most of us are ready to suppose; and within the sphere of its successful operation there is nothing to be said against it as a religious solution. But it breaks down impotently as soon as melancholy comes; and even though one be quite free from melancholy one's self, there is no doubt that healthy-mindedness is inadequate as a philosophical doctrine, because the evil facts which it refuses positively to account for are a genuine portion of reality; and they may after all be the best key to life's significance, and possibly the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth.
>
> The normal process of life contains moments as bad as any of those which insane melancholy is filled with, moments in which radical evil gets its innings and takes its solid turn. The lunatic's visions of horror are all drawn from the material of daily fact. Our civilization is founded on the shambles, and every individual existence goes out in a lonely spasm of helpless agony. If you protest, my friend, wait until you arrive there yourself. (*The Varieties of Religious Experience,* 1902)

James himself suffered a brush with melancholy, but he made a full recovery and began to think positively, or at least equivocally, about being alive, answering yes to the question "Is life worth living?" However, by force of his honesty of intellect he knew this opinion needed to be defended as much as any other opinion. No logic can support it. Indeed, logic defeats all feeling that life is worth living, which, James says, only a self-willed belief in a higher order of existence can instill. Then every suffering will seem worthwhile in the way that the vivisection of a living dog, to use James's example, would seem worthwhile to the animal if only it could comprehend the goodly ends its pain serves for the higher order of human existence. In his lecture "Is Life worth Living," James opined that human beings, unlike dogs, can in fact imagine a higher order of existence than theirs, one that may legitimate the worst adversities of mortal life. James was a rare philosopher in that he put no faith in logic. And he was doubtless wise to adopt that stance, since the fortunes of those who attempt to defend their opinions with logic are not enviable.

Naturally, for those whose opinion is that it is "better to be" than "better never to have been," Benatar's logic for the latter proposition is rejected as faulty, the more so in that its conclusions are not supported by a consensus of ordinary folk. Logic notwithstanding, Benatar's moral-ethical censure of reproduction does prove that humanity's continuance is not universally accepted as a good in itself, even in a super-modern world. It also reminds us that no one can make a case that every individual's birth, or any individual's birth, is a good in itself. And *that* is the case that needs to be made, at least morally and ethically speaking as well as logically speaking. (For more on this, see the section *Pressurized* in the chapter "The Cult of Grinning Martyrs.") If most people believe that *being* alive is all right—the alternative to this belief having no appeal for them—the rectitude of causing new people to *become* alive is just a matter of opinion.

Repression

In "The Last Messiah," Zapffe wrote: "The whole of living that we see before our eyes today is from inmost to outmost enmeshed in repressional mechanisms, social and individual; they can be traced right into the tritest formulas of everyday life." The quartet of formulas that Zapffe picked out as individual and social mechanisms of repression are probably the most trite he could have chosen, which may have been deliberate on his part because they are so familiar to us and so visible in our day-to-day existence. These mechanisms are related to the psychoanalytic theory of unconscious repression, although they are also perilously accessible to the conscious mind. And when they are accessed, no one can concede them with impunity. Not overweight persons or tobacco users, who must play dumb when they are scarfing down a cupcake or smoking a cigarette. Not soldiers fighting a war, who must not be aware they are risking their lives and limbs for a rationalization—their country, their god, etc. Not anyone who is going to suffer and die (that is, everyone), who will not voluntarily confess to playing the same old games for as long as possible rather than be haunted by thoughts of mortality and

the unpleasantness that may precede it. And definitely not artists, who keep their aesthetic distance for fear of being hamstrung by the realities they "bring to life."

Once the facts that repressional mechanisms hide are accessed, they must be excised from our memory—or new repressional mechanisms must replace the old—so that we may continue to be protected by our cocoon of lies. If this is not done, we will be whimpering misereres morning, noon, and night instead of chanting that day by day, in every way, we are getting better and better. Although we may sometimes admit to the guileful means we use to keep us doing what we do, this is only a higher level of self-deception and paradox, not evidence that we stand on the heights of some meta-reality where we are really real. We say we know what is in store for us in this life, and we do. But we do not *know.* We cannot if we are to survive and multiply.

Annotating humanity's attempt to bluff itself in the interest of the species is an extensive literature on self-deception, denial, and repression.[10] Naturally, none of those working in this area of study believe human life to be such a morass of self-deception, denial, and repression that we do not know which way is up. But in Zapffe's analysis of self-deception, denial, and repression, we cannot know which way is up without paying dearly for this knowledge. Enough of us must addle our consciousness so that we can be far less conscious than we might, which is the tragedy of the human species, for anyone who might have forgotten. Those who cannot pull this off will suffer the consequences.

Some who study self-deception, denial, etc. believe these are healthy practices if they facilitate our happiness without infringing on the happiness of our fellows. They speak of self-deception, denial, etc. as "useful fictions" or "positive illusions" and ballyhoo them as staples for both the individual and society. (For his book *Vital Lies, Simple Truths: The Psychology of Self-Deception* [1996], Daniel Goleman studied how people and groups play along with factitious designs to scotch the animus and anxiety that would be loosed if an

etiquette of honesty were somehow enforced.) Others believe that self-deceptive practices are too complex to be usefully analyzed. This does not mean that self-deceptive practices do not support heinous acts by the ingenious denial of these acts (Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering,* 2001); it only means that we cannot know how self-deception works in these cases. Finally, many of those who study self-deception believe we are not capable of self-deception because we cannot both consciously know something and consciously not know it, for this would involve us in a paradox.

However, others have reasoned their way around this supposed paradox. An example of such reasoning is presented by Kent Bach ("An Analysis of Self-Deception," *Philosophy and Phenomenal Research,* 1981), who offers three means of avoiding unwanted thoughts that are nevertheless accessible to a subject's consciousness: *rationalization, evasion, and jamming.* These are identical to the methods of isolation, anchoring, and distraction spotted by Zapffe in human life. Each may keep a subject in a state of self-deception regarding what is really the case. Bach's essay does not, of course, extend his three categories of self-deception to the entire human species, as does Zapffe. To Zapffe, we remember, we are all by nature and necessity false and paradoxical beings and should terminate our existence as strangers to reality who cannot live as we are and cannot live otherwise, who must constrain our consciousness because, tragically, our sanity depends on it.

In his *Why We Lie: The Evolution of Deception and the Unconscious Mind* (2007), David Livingstone Smith examines the mechanisms of self-deception and denial, both individual and social, in terms of evolutionary psychology. This approach leads him to a conclusion about these mechanisms that is compatible with Zapffe's diagnosis of humanity as a paradox. Smith's thesis is that at some time in the remote past the human mind split into the dual levels of conscious and unconscious processes the better to deceive itself and others for the purpose of adaptation. This makes Smith's hy-

pothesis about the process of denial tantamount to that of the psychoanalytic theory of repression, by which individuals deny unpalatable facts about themselves to themselves, and, by extension, to others. Smith is in fact a psychoanalyst, and this may be seen in his statement that the "ever-present possibility of deceit is a crucial dimension of every human relationship, even the most central: our relationship with our very selves." To practice this deceit, one must repress consciousness of the deceiving, which does not exclude self-deception concerning consciousness itself and what it discloses about human life. Effectively, then, Smith is allied with Zapffe's position that the human being

> performs … a more or less self-conscious *repression* [Zapffe's emphasis] of its damning surplus of consciousness. The process is virtually constant during our waking and active hours, and is a requirement of social adaptability and of everything commonly referred to as healthy and normal living.
>
> Psychiatry even works on the assumption that the "healthy" and viable is at one with the highest in personal terms. Depression, "fear of life," refusal of nourishment and so on are invariably taken as signs of a pathological state and treated thereafter. Often, however, such phenomena are messages from a deeper, more immediate sense of life, bitter fruits of a geniality of thought or feeling at the root of anti-biological tendencies. It is not the soul being sick, but its protection failing, or else being rejected because it is experienced—correctly—as a betrayal of ego's highest potential.

Even though Zapffe regarded psychoanalysis as another form of anchoring, whether or not a repressional mechanism is accessible to our consciousness or is wholly unconscious seems a trivial point. For both Smith and Zapffe, they lead to the same thing: occlusion of the real. Another thing Smith and Zapffe share is that their ideas about humankind are not scientifically verifiable and will not be for some time to come, if ever. And without proof on a platter, anyone whose ideas are unpalatable to scientists, philosophers, and average mortals must expect to be poorly heard. Smith does not seem to understand this, and in the closing pages of his book expresses hope that humanity will one day "get real," as the saying goes. At the end of "The Last Messiah," Zapffe expressed an unconditional pessimism that this could ever happen, which was patently the only reasonable attitude for him to take. Smith himself might consider "getting real" about his hope we will

ever get real, given that humanity will always have its reasons for being repressed, self-deceptive, and unreal. A utopia in which we no longer deny the realities we presently must repress cannot be realistically hoped for. And who except a pessimist would wish for that utopia?

The effectiveness of conscious repressional mechanisms has been analyzed from many angles, particularly in relation to the fear of death. An enumeration of traditional strategies for grappling with thanatophobia appears in *Choices for Living: Coping with the Fear of Dying* (2002) by Thomas S. Langer. Although the subtitle of this book suggests that it concentrates on the fear of dying, it is more about the fear of death, not about the suffering and terror that may attend either a short-lived or a dawdling migration into death. Factually, Langer's book, like many others of its kind, is fixated on living rather than on either death or dying, which seem to be only blurry contingencies while an individual is alive.

DOCTOR: "I'm afraid you have an inoperable tumor and haven't long to live."
PATIENT: "That can't be. I feel in perfect health."

POLICE OFFICER: "I'm sorry to inform you, ma'am, that your husband has been involved in a vehicular misadventure. He's dead."
WIFE: "That can't be. He just left the house ten minutes ago."

Given a little time, of course, the cancer patient and the woman who just lost her husband come around to their respective realities. Acceptance of one's new condition, as opposed to going mad or reacting in some other pathological manner, seems to be the usual process—on the condition, naturally, that an individual lives long enough to accept it and does not die of an inoperable tumor first. In the media and all forms of entertainment, such bad breaks are exposed to us all our lives. But we still do not heed the old saw "Hope for the best, but expect the worst." Instead, we hope for the best and think we have a very good chance of getting it. If we really expected the worst, we might well go mad or react in some other

pathological manner before the worst came for us and ours. And that really would be the worst.

Suffering I

For almost all philosophers who write about death, the subject is studied in the abstract, with the unsightly tangibles at its bedside either bracketed or shrugged off. If dying is even given the time of day by philosophers, it must be studied as a sub-category of SUFFERING, THE MEANING OF, which few thinkers discuss outside of moral philosophy and ethics, relatively soft cognitive pastimes when placed beside logic, epistemology, ontology, etc. Philosophies that take human suffering as their overarching subject are given short shrift by analytic types, who leave SUFFERING, THE MEANING OF to religions such as Buddhism and Christianity, or to pessimists. Unless a philosopher is prepared to go all the way with it, to take a hard line on its relevance to the whole of human life, as did Schopenhauer and a few other relics of the pre-modern era, he will balk at saying anything about suffering.

One who did not balk entirely was the Austrian-born British philosopher Karl Popper, who in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945) did have a thing or two to say about human suffering. Briefly, he revamped the Utilitarianism of the nineteenth-century British philosopher John Stuart Mill, who wrote: "Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to promote the reverse of happiness." Popper remolded this summation of a positive utilitarianism into a *negative* utilitarianism whose position he handily stated as follows: "It adds to clarity in the fields of ethics, if we formulate our demands negatively, *i.e.* if we demand the elimination of suffering rather than the promotion of happiness." Taken to its logical and most humanitarian conclusion, Popper's demand can have as its only end the elimination of those who now suffer as well as "counterfactual" beings who will suffer if they are born. What else could the "elimination of suffering" mean if not its total abolition, and ours? Naturally, Popper held his horses well before suggesting that to eliminate suffering would demand that we as

a species be eliminated. But as R. N. Smart famously argued (*Mind,* 1958), this is the only conclusion to be drawn from Negative Utilitarianism.

In "The Last Messiah," Zapffe is not sanguine about eliminating suffering, nor is he so unworldly as to beseech a communal solution for its elimination by snuffing out the human race, as did the Cathari and the Bogomils. (He does lash out at the barbarism of social or religious proscription of suicide, but he is not a standard-bearer for this form of personal salvation.) To reiterate with due compunction, Zapffe's thought is foremost an addendum to that of various sects and individuals who have resolved that conscious existence is so odious that extinction is preferable to survival. It also has the value of advancing a new answer to an old question: "Why should generations unborn be spared entry into the human thresher?" But what might be called "Zapffe's Paradox," in the tradition of possessively named formulations that saturate primers of philosophy, is as useless as the propositions of any other thinker who is pro-life or anti-life or is only juggling concepts to clinch what is reality and can we ever get there. That said, we can continue as if it had not been said. The measure of a philosopher's thought is not in its answers or the problems it poses, but in how well it fiddles with these answers and problems such that they animate the minds of others. Thus the importance—and the nullity—of rhetoric. Ask any hard-line pessimist, but do not expect him to expect you to take his words seriously.

Suffering II

Perhaps the greatest strike against philosophical pessimism is that its only theme is human suffering. This is the last item on the list of our species' obsessions and detracts from everything that matters to us, such as the Good, the Beautiful, and a Sparkling Clean Toilet Bowl. For the pessimist, everything considered in isolation from human suffering or any cognition that does not have as its motive the origins, nature, and elimination of human suffering is at base recreational, whether it takes the form of conceptual probing or

physical action in the world—for example, delving into game theory or traveling in outer space, respectively. And by "human suffering," the pessimist is not thinking of particular sufferings and their relief, but of suffering itself. Remedies may be discovered for certain diseases and sociopolitical barbarities may be amended. But these are only stopgaps. Human suffering will remain insoluble as long as human beings exist. The one truly effective solution for suffering is that spoken of in Zapffe's "Last Messiah." It may not be a welcome solution for a stopgap world, but it would forever put an end to suffering, should we ever care to do so. The pessimist's credo, or one of them, is that nonexistence never hurt anyone and existence hurts everyone. Although our selves may be illusory creations of consciousness, our pain is nonetheless real.

As a survival-happy species, our successes are calculated in the number of years we have extended our lives, with the reduction of suffering being only incidental to this aim. To stay alive under almost any circumstances is a sickness with us. Nothing could be more unhealthy than to "watch one's health" as a means of stalling death. The lengths we will go as procrastinators of that last gasp only demonstrate a morbid dread of that event. By contrast, our fear of suffering is deficient. So Shakespeare's Edgar when he passes on the wisdom that "the worst is not / So long as we can say 'This is the worst.'" Officially, there are no fates worse than death. Unofficially, there is a profusion of such fates. For some people, just living with the thought that they will die is a fate worse than death itself.

Longevity is without question of paramount value in our lives, and finding a corrective for mortality is our compulsive project. Anything goes insofar as lengthening our earthly tenure. And how we have cashed in on our efforts. No need to cram our lives into two or three decades now that we can cram them into seven, eight, nine, or more. The lifespan of non-domesticated mammals has never changed, while ours has grown by leaps and bounds. What a coup for the human race. Unaware how long they will live, other warm-blooded

life forms are sluggards by comparison. Time will run out for us as it does for all creatures, true, but at least we can dream of a day when we might *elect* our own deadline. Then perhaps we can all die of the same thing: a killing satiation with our durability in a world that is MALIGNANTLY USELESS.

"Worthless" rather than "useless" is the more familiar epithet in this context. The rationale for using "useless" in place of "worthless" in this histrionically capitalized phrase is that "worthless" is tied to the concepts of desirability and value, and *by their depreciation* introduces them into the existential mix. "Useless," on the other hand, is not so inviting of these concepts. Elsewhere in this work, "worthless" is connected to the language of pessimism and does what damage it can. But the devil of it is that "worthless" really does not go far enough when speaking pessimistically about the character of existence. Too many times the question "Is life worth living?" has been asked. This usage of "worth" excites impressions of a fair lot of experiences that are arguably desirable and valuable within limits and that may follow upon one another in such a way as to suggest that life is not totally worthless. With "useless," the wispy spirits of desirability and value do not as readily rear their heads. Naturally, the *uselessness* of all that is or could ever be is subject to the same repudiations as the *worthlessness* of all that is or could ever be. For this reason, the adverb "malignantly" has been annexed to "useless" to give it a little more semantic stretch and a dose of toxicity. But to express with any adequacy a sense of the uselessness of everything, a nonlinguistic modality would be needed, some effusion out of a dream that amalgamated every gradation of the useless and wordlessly transmitted to us the inanity of existence under any possible conditions. Indigent of such means of communication, the uselessness of all that exists or could possibly exist must be spoken with a poor potency.

Not unexpectedly, no one believes that everything is useless, and with good reason. We all live within relative frameworks, and within those frameworks uselessness is far wide of the norm. A potato masher is not useless if one wants to

mash potatoes. For some people, a system of being that includes an afterlife of eternal bliss may not seem useless. They might say that such a system is absolutely useful because it gives them the hope they need to make it through this life. But an afterlife of eternal bliss is not and cannot be absolutely useful simply because you need it to be. It is part of a relative framework and nothing beyond that, just as a potato masher is only part of a relative framework and is useful only if you need to mash potatoes. Once you had made it through this life to an afterlife of eternal bliss, you would have no use for that afterlife. Its job would be done, and all you would have is an afterlife of eternal bliss—a paradise for reverent hedonists and pious libertines. What is the use in that? You might as well not exist at all, either in this life or in an afterlife of eternal bliss. Any kind of existence is useless. Nothing is self-justifying. Everything is justified only in a relativistic potato-masher sense.

There are some people who do not get up in arms about potato-masher relativism, while other people do. The latter want to think in terms of absolutes that are really absolute and not just absolute potato mashers. Christians, Jews, and Muslims have a real problem with a potato-masher system of being. Buddhists have no problem with a potato-masher system because for them there are no absolutes. What they need to realize is the truth of "dependent origination," which means that everything is related to everything else in a great network of potato mashers that are always interacting with one another. So the only problem Buddhists have is *not* being able to realize that the only absolutely useful thing is the realization that everything is a great network of potato mashers. They think that if they can get over this hump, they will be eternally liberated from suffering. At least they hope they will, which is all they really need to make it through this life. In the Buddhist faith, everyone suffers who cannot see that the world is a MALIGNANTLY USELESS potato-mashing network. However, that does not make Buddhists superior to Christians, Jews, and Muslims. It only means they have a different system for making it through a life where all we can do

is wait for musty shadows to call our names when they are ready for us. After that happens, there will be nobody who will need anything that is not absolutely useless. Ask any atheist.

Ecocide

Despite Zapffe's work as a philosopher, although not in an occupational role (he earned his living by writing poems, plays, stories, and humorous pieces), he is better known as an early ecologist who popularized the term "biosophy" to name a discipline that would broaden the compass of philosophy to include the interests of other living things besides human beings. In this capacity, he serves as an inspiration to environmentalists who worry about the well-being of the earth and its organisms. Here, too, we catch ourselves—and Zapffe himself, as he affirmed—in the act of conspiring to build barricades against the repugnant facts of life by signing on to a cause (in this case that of environmentalism) that snubs the real issue. Vandalism of the environment is but a sidebar to humanity's refusal to look into the jaws of existence.

In truth, we have only one foot in the natural environment of this world. Other worlds are always calling us away from nature. We live in a habitat of unrealities—not of earth, air, water, and wildlife—and cradling illusion trounces grim logic every time. Some of the more combative environmentalists, however, have concurred with Zapffe that we should retire from existence. But their advocacy of worldwide suicide as a strategy for saving the earth from being pillaged by human beings receives no mention in "The Last Messiah" and was probably not on Zapffe's mind when he wrote this essay. As appealing as a universal suicide pact may be, why take part in it just to conserve this planet, this dim bulb in the blackness of space? Nature produced us, or at least subsidized our evolution. It intruded on an inorganic wasteland and set up shop. What evolved was a global workhouse where nothing is ever at rest, where the generation and discarding of life incessantly goes on. By what virtue, then, is it entitled to receive a pardon for this original sin—a capital crime in reverse, just as

reproduction makes one an accessory before the fact to an individual's death?

In its course, nature has made blunders in plenty. These are left to die out, as is nature's wont. Perhaps this will be how we will go—a natural death. It might be idly theorized, though, that nature has a special plan for human beings and devised us to serve as a way revoking itself, much like Mainländer's self-expunging God. An offbeat idea, no protest, but not the strangest we have ever heard or lived by. We could at least take up the hypothesis and see where it leads. If it is proved unviable, then where is the harm? But until then, might we not let ourselves be drawn along by nature's plan, which includes our sacking the earth as a paradoxical means of living better in it, or at least living as *our nature* bids us to live.

We did not make ourselves, nor did we fashion a world that could not work without pain, and great pain at that, with a little pleasure, very little, to string us along—a world where all organisms are inexorably pushed by pain throughout their lives to do that which will improve their chances to survive and create more of themselves. Left unchecked, this process will last as long as a single cell remains palpitating in this cesspool of the solar system, this toilet of the galaxy. So why not lend a hand in nature's suicide? For want of a deity that could be held to account for a world in which there is terrible pain, let nature take the blame for our troubles. We did not create an environment uncongenial to our species, nature did. One would think that nature was trying to kill us off, or get us to suicide ourselves once the blunder of consciousness came upon us. What was nature thinking? We tried to anthropomorphize it, to romanticize it, to let it into our hearts. But nature kept its distance, leaving us to our own devices. So be it. Survival is a two-way street. Once we settle ourselves off-world, we can blow up this planet from outer space. It's the only way to be sure its stench will not follow us. Let it save itself if it can—the condemned are known for the acrobatics they will execute to wriggle out of their sentences. But if it cannot destroy what it has made, and what could

possibly unmake it, then may it perish along with every other living thing it has introduced to pain. While no species has given in to pain to the point of giving up its existence, so far as we know, it is not a phenomenon whose praises are often sung.

Hopelessness

In Zapffe's "The Last Messiah," the titular figure appears at the end and makes the mock-Socratic, biblically parodic pronouncement, "Know yourselves—*be infertile and let the earth be silent after ye*" (Zapffe's emphasis). As Zapffe pictures the scene, the Last Messiah's words will not be well received: "And when he has spoken, they will pour themselves over him, led by the pacifier makers and the midwives, and bury him in their fingernails." Semantically speaking, the Last Messiah is not a messiah, since he saves no living soul and will be erased from human memory by a vigilante group whose kingpins are "the pacifier makers and the midwives." Moreover, a resurrection seems to be the last thing in the Last Messiah's future.

To exposit why humanity should not further tarry on earth is one thing; to believe that this proposition will be agreeable to others is quite another. Due to the note of hopelessness in the coda to Zapffe's essay, we are discouraged from imagining a world in which the self-liquidation of humanity could ever be put into effect. The Norwegian himself did not take the trouble to do so in "The Last Messiah." No reason he should, since he would first have to imagine a new humanity, which is not as a practice done outside of fiction, a medium of realism but not of reality.

Yet these new humans would not have to be super-evolved or otherwise freakish organisms living far in the future. They would only have to be like Zapffe in recognizing that a retreat from the worldly scene would be a benevolent proceeding for the good of the unborn. Becoming extinct would seem to be a tall order, but not one that would be insurmountably time-consuming. Zapffe optimistically projected that those of the new humanity could be evacuated from existence over the

course of a few generations. And indeed they could. As their numbers tapered off, these dead-enders of our species could be the most privileged individuals in history and share with one another material comforts once held in trust only for the well-born or money-getting classes of the world. Since personal economic gain would be passé as a motive for the new humanity, there would be only one defensible incitement to work: to see one another through to the finish, a project that would keep everyone busy and not just staring into space while they waited for the end. There might even be bright smiles exchanged among these selfless benefactors of those who would never be forced to exist. And how many would speed up the process of extinction once euthanasia was decriminalized and offered in humane and even enjoyable ways?

What a relief, what an unburdening to have closed the book on humankind. Yet it would not need to be slammed shut. As long as we progressed toward a thinning of the herd, couples could still introduce new faces into the human fold as billions became millions and then thousands. New generations would learn about the past, and, like those before them, feel lucky not to have been born in times of fewer conveniences and cures, although they might still play at cowboys and Indians, cops and robbers, management and labor. The last of us could be the very best of us who ever roamed the earth, the great exemplars of a humanity we used to dream of becoming before we got wise to the reality that we are just a mob always in the market for new recruits.

Quite naturally, this depiction of an end times by an extinctionist covenant will seem abhorrent to those now living in hope of a better future (not necessarily one in which glorious progress has been made toward the alleviation of human misery, but at least one that will partially exculpate them from a depraved indifference to the harm predestined for their young). It may also seem a romanticized utopia, since those who predict major readjustments in humanity's self-conception (Karl Marx, et al.) often believe that a revolution in ethics will blossom when their "truths" are instituted.

Worse, or perhaps better if the solution to human suffering is to be final, the idea of a new humanity may be a smokescreen for a tyrannical oligarchy run by militants of extinction rather than a social and psychological sanctuary for a species harboring the universal goal of delimiting its stay on earth. If Zapffe uselessly exercised himself by formulating the thesis of "The Last Messiah," he was sharp enough to give it a hopeless finale. Without an iota of uncertainty, humankind is and will always be unsuited to take charge of its own deliverance. The delusional will forever be with us, thereby making pain, fear, and denial of what is right in front of our face the preferred style of living and the one that will be passed on to countless generations.

The reception of the research of a Canadian scientist named Michael Persinger may be seen as an indication of humanity's genius for keeping itself locked into its old ways. In the 1980s, Persinger modified a motorcycle helmet to affect the magnetic fields of the brain of its wearer, inducing a variety of strange sensations. These included experiences in which subjects felt themselves proximate to supernatural phenomena that included ghosts and gods.

Atheists used Persinger's studies to nail closed their argument for the subjectivity of anyone's sense of the supernatural. Not to be left behind, believers wrote their own books in which they contended that the magnetic-field-emitting motorcycle helmet proved the existence of a god that "hardwired" itself into our brains. A field of study called neurotheology grew up around this and other laboratory experiments. Even if you can prop up a scientific theory with a cudgel of data that should render the holy opposition unconscious, they will be standing ready to discredit you—imprisonment, torture, and public execution having gone the way of chastity belts.

For writers of supernatural horror the perquisite of this deadlock is that it ensures the larger part of humanity will remain in a state of fear, because no one can ever be certain of either his own ontological status or that of gods, demons,

alien invaders, and sundry other bugbears. A Buddhist would advise that we forget about whether or not the bogeymen we have invented or divined are real. The big question is this: Are *we* real?

Debatability

Even though Zapffe's theory is perceptible in our lives, we do not actually have any sense, or any strong sense, that human beings are false and paradoxical beings, at least not yet. And if we did, why would that mean we should go extinct and not continue to live as we have all these years? One would think that neuroscientists and geneticists would have as much reason to head for the cliffs because little by little they have been finding that much of our thought and behavior is attributable to neural wiring and heredity rather than to personal control over the individuals we are, or think we are. But they do not feel suicide to be mandatory just because their laboratory experiments are informing them that human nature may be nothing but puppet nature. Not the slightest tingle of uncanniness or horror runs up and down their spines, only the thrill of discovery. Most of them reproduce and do not believe there is anything questionable in doing so. If they could get a corpse to sit up on an operating table, they would jubilantly exclaim, "It's alive!" And so would we. Who cares that human beings evolved from slimy materials? We can live with that, or most of us can. Actually, we can probably live with any conception of ourselves for quite a while longer. Although we may have phases in which the power of positive thinking peters out, no scientific discoveries or anything else can get to us for long, at least not as far as we can see into the future. As a species with consciousness, we do have our inconveniences. Yet these are of negligible importance compared to what it would be like to feel in our depths that we are nothing but human puppets—things of mistaken identity who must live with the terrible knowledge that they are *not* making a go of it on their own and are not what they once thought they were. At this time, barely anyone can conceive of this happening—of hitting bottom and finding to our despair that we

can never again resurrect our repressions and denials. Not until that day of lost illusions comes, if it ever comes, will we all be competent to conceive of such a thing. But a great many more generations will pass through life before that happens, if it happens.

Who Goes There?

Uncanniness I

No philosopher has ever satisfactorily answered the following question: "Why should there be something rather than nothing?" It seems a fair enough question on its face. But that it should even be asked may seem to some of us as inexplicable, even preposterous. What the question suggests is our uneasiness with Something. Alternatively, there is nothing troubling about Nothing, because we cannot give it consideration. Something allows or necessitates our experience of the uncanny. Whether we are speaking of something that evolved naturally or was made by the digits and opposing thumbs of humanity, whether it is animate or inanimate, that something may become uncanny to us, a contravention of what we think should or should not be.

In the same way that most of us share a general pattern of feeling about what is right or wrong in a moral sense, we also share a general pattern of feeling about what is right or wrong with respect to the world and ourselves—an internal authority that judges entities and events as within or outside of customs of reality. In experiencing the uncanny, there is a feeling of *wrongness.* A violation has transpired that alarms our internal authority regarding how something is supposed to happen or exist or behave. An offense against our world-conception or self-conception has been committed. Of course, our internal authority may itself be in the wrong, perhaps because it is a fabrication of consciousness based on a body of laws that are written only within us and not a detector of what is right or wrong in any real sense, since nothing really is right or wrong in any real sense. That we might be wrong about something being wrong would in itself be wrong according to our internal authority, which would then send out a signal of the uncanny concerning its own wrongness that would be returned to it for another round of signaling on the principle that everything it knows is wrong, which is to say that Something is always wrong. For the welfare of

our functioning, however, we are insured against the adverse effects of an ever-cycling signal of uncanny wrongness by our inability to recognize it, although it might be going on all the time, thus accounting for our uneasiness about Something. But we may still perceive other phenomena to be on the wrong side of right and wrong—things that should not happen or exist or behave in the way we feel they should.

Even the most unexceptional things may impress us in this way. In no time at all they may cease to be seen the way we usually see them and come to be seen as something else, something we may not be able to name. This unsteadiness of quality and meaning in something—a puppet doll, for instance—repels our lasting inspection of it, for the longer this inspection goes on the more we become lost in a paradoxical state of knowing and not knowing what was once known and familiar. And it is then that the question "Why should there be something rather than nothing?" may become lost in the inexplicable, even preposterous, ambition to resolve it without losing our minds to the uncanny.

Everyday objects seem curiously liable to being perceived as uncanny, because we see them every day and "know" how they should be and should not be. One day those shoes on the floor of your clothes closet may attract your eye in a way they never have before. Somehow they have become abstracted from your world, appearances you cannot place, lumps of matter without a fixed quality and meaning. You feel confused as you stare at them. What are they? What is their nature? Why should there be something rather than nothing? But before your consciousness can ask any more questions, you dial it back so that your footwear seems familiar again and not uncanny in its being. You select a pair of shoes to wear that day and sit down to put them on. It is then that you notice the pair of stockings you are wearing and think of the feet they conceal … and the rest of the body to which those concealed feet are connected … and the universe in which that body is roving about with so many other uncanny shapes. "What now?" a voice from the other side of being seems to say. And what if you should look at yourself—the

most everyday object there is—and feel at a loss to attach a quality and a meaning to what is being seen or what is seeing it. What now indeed.

Uncanniness II

A sense of the uncanny can be activated in the average mortal under various conditions. Principal among these conditions are those which cause us to feel that we are not what we think we are, which was touched on at the close of the previous section. In his groundbreaking essay "On the Psychology of the Uncanny" (1906), the German physician and psychologist Ernst Jentsch analyzes this feeling and its origins. Among the examples of uncanny experience Jentsch proffers in his essay is one where individuals cease to appear integrated in their identity and take on the aspect of mechanisms, things of parts that are made as they are made and are all clockwork processes rather than immutable beings unchanging at their heart. As Jentsch explains:

> [A] confirmation of the fact that the emotion being discussed [the uncanny] is caused in particular by a doubt as to the animate or inanimate nature of things—or, expressed more precisely, as to their animatedness as understood by man's traditional view—lies in the way in which the lay public is generally affected by the sight of articulations of most mental and many nervous diseases. Several patients afflicted with such troubles make a quite decidedly uncanny impression on most people.
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> What we can always assume from our fellow men's experience of ordinary life is the relative psychical harmony in which their mental functions generally stand in relation to each other, even if moderate deviations from this equilibrium make their appearance occasionally in almost all of us: this behavior … constitutes man's individuality and provides the foundation for our judgment of it. Most people do not show strong psychical peculiarities. At most, such peculiarities become apparent when strong affects make themselves felt, whereby it can suddenly become evident that not everything in the human psyche is of transcendental origin, and that much that is elementary is still present within it even for our direct perception. It is of course often in just such cases that much at present is generally accounted for quite well in terms of normal psychology.
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> But if this relative psychical harmony happens markedly to be disturbed in the spectator, and if the situation does not seem trivial or comic, the consequence of an unimportant incident, or if it is not quite familiar (like an alcohol intoxication, for example), then the dark knowledge dawns on the unschooled observer that mechanical processes are taking place in that which he was previously used to regarding as a unified psyche. It is not unjustly that epilepsy is therefore spoken of as the *morbus sacer* ["sacred disease"], as

> an illness not deriving from the human world but from foreign and enigmatic spheres, for the epileptic attack of spasms reveals the human body to the viewer—the body that under normal conditions is so meaningful, expedient, and unitary, functioning according to the directions of his consciousness—as an immensely complicated and delicate mechanism. This is an important cause of the epileptic fit's ability to produce such a demonic effect on those who see it. (Translation by Roy Sellars)

The brilliance of Jentsch's example is that it explicates the uncanny not as an objective quality of something in the outside world, but as a subjective experience of a perceiver of the outside world. This is how it is in real life: The uncanny is an effect of our minds—and nothing else. And yet, at least for the average onlooker in this case, the uncanny effectively originates in an objective stimulus, something that seems to have about it a power of its own. In the example given, the objective stimulus is an animate individual observed as behaving against "animatedness as understood by man's traditional view," the offender here being an epileptic exhibiting unusual bodily motions in the midst of a seizure. The subjective reaction to the seemingly objective stimulus of the uncanny is the gaining of "dark knowledge" about the workings of individuals, including the onlooker of the epileptic in the midst of a seizure. More expansively stated, not only is the epileptic perceived as uncanny by the onlooker (unless the onlooker is a physician who understands epileptic seizures by the lights of modern medicine and not according to a "traditional view") but the onlooker also perceives himself as uncanny because he has been made conscious of the mechanical nature of all human bodies and, by extrapolation, of the fact that "mechanical processes are taking place in that which he was previously used to regarding as a unified psyche." Neuroscientists are now familiar with some of these mechanical processes, as was Zapffe, who wrote in "The Last Messiah": "All things chain together in causes and effects, and everything [man] wants to grasp dissolves before the testing thought. Soon he sees mechanics even in the so-far whole and dear, in the smile of his beloved." The knowledge that we are not the idealized beings we thought, integral and undivided, does frighten some people, including physicians and

neuroscientists. Yet even though we are not as we usually perceive ourselves to be, we can still continue in our accustomed ways if only we can quash the sense of being uncanny mechanisms in a world of things that may be transformed anytime and anywhere. Such quashing is not often a problem in the so-called real world. But it *must* be a problem in the world of supernatural horror.

Artistic invocations of horror are most successful when the phenomena they depict call up the uncanny, which, unlike Jentsch's example of seeing someone having an epileptic seizure, are genuinely threatening both from the outside and from within. This species of horror can only be provoked when the supernatural is conjoined with the uncanny, because not even physicians and neuroscientists can be comfortable with supernaturalism, either by the lights of modern medicine or by any other lights. Bloodthirsty vampires and ravenous zombies are prime examples in this context, because their intrinsic supernaturalism as the undead makes them objectively uncanny things that generate subjectively uncanny sensations. They are uncanny in themselves because they once were human but have undergone a terrible rebirth and become mechanisms with a single function—to survive for survival's sake. Necessarily, they also inspire a subjective sense of the uncanny in those who perceive them because they divulge the "dark knowledge" that human beings are also things made as they are made and may be remade because they are only clockwork processes, mechanisms, rather than immutable beings unchanging at their heart. As uncanny mechanisms, vampires and zombies usually perform the mechanical act of reproduction with no weighty deliberation, or none at all—the replication their kind being epiphenomenal to the controlling urge that drives them. This second consequence completes the requirements of a supernatural horror story to present a phenomenon that poses an uncanny threat from both outside and from within, which is the ultimate threat to ordinary folk who only want to live in a world and in a way that is natural and familiar to

them and their families, even though they are darkly aware that this familiarity is a fabrication that may be invalidated.

Both requirements of the uncanny are recognizable in such horror films as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956; remakes 1978 and 2007) and John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982), which belong only negligibly to the genre of science fiction and solidly to that of supernatural horror as cognate with the uncanny. In the former classic of cinema, human beings are replaced by physical doubles of themselves by an alien power —something pernicious, in Jentsch's analysis of the lay person's perception of epilepsy, "not deriving from the human world but from foreign and enigmatic spheres." What business does this alien power have on our planet? It has come to protract the survival of its kind by recreating itself in *our* image. And that says all we need to know about its mechanics and intentions: They are the same as ours, only they threaten to replace the survival and reproduction of our species with the survival and reproduction of theirs. The methodology of this alien power is to make duplicates of us after we fall asleep, so that we will never again awaken as ourselves but will be transformed into another sort of being altogether. Due to these transformations, everyone who has not been taken by the Body Snatchers suffers from two appalling uncertainties. One is that any other person may not be what they seem to be—human. The other is that they themselves will also be transformed once they go to sleep. But unlike becoming a vampire or a zombie, neither being a desirable state of being, our transformation into Body Snatchers, which, despite the pluralization in the film title, seem to be parts of a hive rather than uniquely individuated entities, does not look too bad, objectively speaking. Once absorbed by the alien power, the converted lose all the qualities they had as humans except for one—that of contentment, or happiness if you like. They become quietists in their existence, which in the film appears the last thing that human beings want, preferring the agitations of the life they know. This reaction is understandable. No one wants to be other than they are, or think they are. That is a fate worse than death: the trans-

formation in which you stop being you. And better to die than to live in an assimilated condition, even one that is permanently collected and reassuring rather than vulnerable to the startling and dreadful. Our sense of the uncanny is too ingrained in us as beings that may not be what we think we are, but who will hold on for dear life to survive and reproduce as our own species and not that of some alien power.

John Carpenter's *The Thing* is quite similar in its ontological scheme to *Invasion of the Body Snatchers.* The motivations of the Thing are the same as those of the Body Snatchers—to survive and reproduce. Only its method is different, which results in a somewhat greater degree of uncanniness in this film than in the earlier one. Because the title creature has the ability to remake itself as any and all life forms without their knowledge, the characters in the film cannot be sure who is a "thing" and who is not, since those who are transmuted retain their former appearance, memories, and behaviors even after they have become, in their essence, uncanny monstrosities from another world. This situation leaves the members of an Antarctic research station—in the vicinity of which the Thing's spacecraft crash-landed long ago—doubtful about which of them is a thing and which are still the individuals they seem to be. Naturally, those at the Antarctic station are invested in repressing any consciousness that they are things, just as those who witness someone in the midst of an epileptic seizure are invested in thinking they are not things of parts that are made as they are made and are all clockwork processes rather than immutable beings unchanging at their heart. By isolation (putting this possibility out of their minds), the latter can maintain their sense of being idealized beings, integral and undivided, and not mechanisms—human puppets who do not know themselves as such. They can also distract themselves from any petrifying news about human beings by watching films in which all of the characters suffer an uncanny doom that could not possibly have relevance to real life, since it is represented as an invasion from "foreign and enigmatic spheres" they believe have no place in our world, where we know who we are and who everyone else

is—members of a species that exists to survive and reproduce, ordinary folk who have nothing to do with supernaturalism and the uncanny and who are resistant to the pessimism of fictions like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and *The Thing,* whose principals all suffer death or deformation in their fight to hang on to their lives and their humanity.

In protest to the mentality of ordinary folk, let us again call on the incorrigibly pixilated Professor Nobody. In his "Pessimism and Supernatural Horror—Lecture One," he accommodates us with a rejoinder to the average, optimistic mortal and helps us recall some of the main themes of the present work.

> Madness, chaos, bone-deep mayhem, devastation of innumerable souls—while we scream and perish, History licks a finger and turns the page. Fiction, unable to compete with the world for vividness of pain and lasting effects of fear, compensates in its own way. How? By inventing more bizarre means to outrageous ends. Among these means, of course, is the supernatural. In transforming natural ordeals into supernatural ones, we find the strength to affirm and deny their horror simultaneously, to savor and suffer them at the same time.
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> So it is that supernatural horror is a possession of a profoundly divided species of being. It is not a property held by even our closest relations in the wholly natural world. We came into it, as part of our gloomy inheritance, when we became what we are. Once awareness of the human predicament was achieved, we immediately took off in two directions, splitting ourselves down the middle. One half became dedicated to apologetics, even celebration, of our new toy of consciousness. The other half condemned and occasionally launched direct assaults on this "gift."
>
> Supernatural horror was one of the ways we found that would allow us to live with our double selves. By its employ, we discovered how to take all the things that victimize us in our natural lives and turn them into the very stuff of demonic delight in our fantasy lives. In story and song, we could entertain ourselves with the worst we could think of, overwriting real pains with ones that were unreal and harmless to our species. We can also do this trick without trespassing on the real estate of supernatural horror, but then we risk running into miseries too close to home. While horror may make us squirm or quake, it will not make us cry at the pity of things. The vampire may symbolize our horror of both life and death, but none of us has ever been uprooted by a symbol. The zombie may conceptualize our sickness of the flesh and its appetites, but no one has ever been sickened to death by a concept. By means of supernatural horror we may pull our own strings of fate without collapsing—natural-born puppets whose lips are painted with our own blood.

Actors

Within the strictures of commonsense reality and personal ability, we can choose to do anything we like in this world … with one exception: We cannot choose what any of our choices will be. To do that, we would have to be capable of making ourselves into self-made individuals who can choose what they choose as opposed to being individuals who simply make choices. For instance, we may want to become bodybuilders and choose to do so. But if we do not want to become bodybuilders we cannot make ourselves into someone who does want to be a bodybuilder. For that to happen, there would have to be another self inside us who made us choose to want to become bodybuilders. And inside that self, there would have to be still another self who made that self want to choose to choose to make us want to become bodybuilders. This sequence of choosing, being interminable, would result in the paradox of an infinite number of selves *beyond which* there is a self making all the choices. The foregoing position is based in a strain of philosophical thought called determinism and is here stated in one of its strongest forms. British philosopher Galen Strawson describes this position, which is his own as a determinist, as pessimistic. ("Luck Swallows Everything," *Times Literary Supplement,* June 28, 1998.) It is pessimist because it turns the human image into a puppet image. And a puppet image of humanity is one of the hallmarks of pessimism.

Those who most vehemently oppose the pessimistic form of determinism are libertarian indeterminists. They hold that we have absolute free will and can make ourselves into individuals who can choose to want to make a certain choice and not some other. They hold that we are what Michelstaedter despaired we could ever become: individuals who are invulnerably self-possessed and not the products of an indeterminable series of events and conditions that result in our being able to make only one choice and not any number of choices, because factors beyond our control have already taken care of who we are as individuals and what choices we will finally make.

In the history of philosophical lucubration, arguments for determinism are traditionally the most argued against. Why is this so, aside from the fact that it turns the human image into a puppet image? It is so because arguments for determinism step on the sacrosanct belief in moral responsibility. Even the average atheist draws the line whenever someone says that we do not have any degree of freedom and that moral responsibility is not a reality. As die-hard unbelievers, they may reject the position that moral laws descend from a higher plane unperceived by our senses; as tax-paying citizens, however, they still need to live by sublunary standards of civility. And this can be done only if free will and moral realism are the law of the land.

Of course, there are rare cases when a wrongdoer's malfeasance is determined to be the result of determining forces. Then free will and moral responsibility are waived, and the defendant is either sent to a psychiatric hospital rather than a prison or gets off scot-free because a certain judge and jury in a certain society temporarily became strong determinists without a sense of moral realism, thereby turning the human image of a defendant into a puppet image. But this is highly irregular. In the normal course of events, both determinists and indeterminists are one in promoting some kind of operative morality. As guardians of our morale, they feel moral realism to be a necessary truth, whether it is objectively *real,* as it is to indeterminists, or subjectively "real," as it is to determinists. Without this *truth,* or "truth," we could not go on living as we always have and believe that being alive is all right.

It does not seem wildly improbable that determinations have been made in our psyches that make some people determinists and others indeterminists. If we could only know how these determinations work, we would be able to answer the only interesting question in the debate pitting free will against determinism: Why argue for one side or the other? The answer to this question would abort all rivalry in this matter, since it would bring to light the reason why any philosopher would engage in a conflict more vain than most

in his discipline. But should we ever get an answer to this question, the repercussions would far override matters of moral *realism* or "realism." Really, there would only be one repercussion: to reduce all philosophical proclivities to the psychology of the individuals who exhibit them. In his *Metaphilosophy and Free Will* (1996), Richard Double speaks of analytic philosophers whose writing is protective of free will.

> Although this type of free will writing pays dividends in terms of precision, it has its disadvantages. First, we may lose sight of the philosophical forest for the technical trees. Second, and following from the first, we may collect psychological consolation at the expense of candor. By submerging ourselves in the nuances of theories, we may avert our attention from the big, scary questions. An attention to detail can be an exercise in bad faith when it uses up our time and energies so that we do not bother to question whether what we are trying to do is possible. Meticulous precision can enable us to remain happy and engaged at the expense of averting our eyes from the disturbing big picture.

Perhaps one day cognitive psychologists will settle once and for all why an individual would argue for either free will or determinism. Studies might also be conducted on those who cling to one side or the other of any philosophical question. This may not advance any philosophical questions, although it might make them disappear once the argumentative motives behind them have been determined.

In the everyday world, no such thing as an out-and-out determinist ever existed, since none can shake off a sense of having free will. The best we can do is to *reason* that we are determined based on observing the common law of causality among things in the world and applying this law to ourselves. But we cannot *feel* ourselves as determined. (One philosopher has said, and possibly more have thought to themselves: "Can one *really* believe in determinism without going insane?") Being determined in thought and deed is not experientially noticeable, only abstractly deducible. It would be impossible for someone to say "I am nothing but a human puppet." The only exception would be an individual with a psychological disease that had induced in him the sense of being controlled by an alien force. Should this individual say "I am nothing but a

human puppet," he would forthwith be marched to the nearest psychiatric hospital, conceivably overtaken by the horror of feeling he was a human puppet controlled by an alien force working outside him or within him or both.

The extent to which any of us is determined in thought and deed may be logically argued but cannot be known by first-hand experience. Determinists are only too aware that if free will is illusory on paper, it is insuperable in our lives. To hate our illusions or hold them dear only lashes us to them more tautly. We cannot stand up to them without our world falling apart, for those who care. And those who really care cannot be anything but believers in some form of moral *realism* or "realism," which buttresses the optimistic reality that most people call home and braces up everything you need in order to be you—your country, your loved ones, your job or vocation, your golf clubs, and, in an all around sense, your "way of life."

Impersonation

In the free will debate, the reality, or "reality," of free will is something of an irrelevancy, since it is a parasite of the feeling we each have of being or possessing a self (often capitalized). This self is an intangible entity that is spoken of as if it were an extra internal organ, yet to every one of us it seems more than the sum of our anatomical parts. Everything comes back to the self and must come back to the self, for it is the utmost issue in our deciding whether we are something or nothing, people or puppets. Without the sense of being or possessing a self, there would be no use disputing whether or not we are free, determined, or somewhere in between. Why we have a sense of self has been variously explained. (For one explanation, see the next section in this chapter.) Having this sense is what brings the free-will-versus-determinism debate to the table. Even further, it is what brings everything to the table, or at least to the table of human existence, because nothing else that exists has a sense of being a self that can do or not do anything at will.

You can *reason* that you do not have a self and that your behavior is determined, but if you *feel* that you are or possess a self, then you will probably have a time of it denying responsibility for every thought that passes through your brain or the slightest movement of your little toe. Yet there is a problem with the feeling of responsibility, because sometimes you feel responsible for something that you cannot, by any logic or physical law, be held responsible for. When someone dies of an undiagnosed case of liver cancer not long after he punches you in the stomach, you cannot say, "That's what he gets for messing with me." Yet people do say such things in such circumstances. Nevertheless, they can usually be brought to their senses about feeling somehow responsible for the death by unrelated causes of someone who has punched them in the stomach.

More often, though, an individual cannot be brought to his senses when he feels responsible for something that he cannot, by any logic or physical law, be held responsible for. For example, you call up a friend or a relative to help you fix your toilet, and while driving over to your place to do this he is hit by an eighteen-wheel truck and dies. It would not be out of the ordinary if you felt responsible for your friend or relative's death for the reason that if you had not called him up to help fix your toilet he would not have been on the road at that time and gotten killed in a collision with an eighteen-wheel truck. Under these circumstances, your friends and relatives who are still alive may find it difficult to convince you of your non-responsibility in the death of your friend or relative who died in a vehicular misadventure. There may be any number of factors involved in that fatal collision, but you could still feel that the only factor worth consideration was your calling up your friend or relative to drive over to your place when he would otherwise have been doing something you had nothing to do with. You would be mistaken to feel this way, of course, but just because you can *reason* that you are mistaken would not in itself make you *feel* any less responsible for what happened. And you may mistakenly take that feeling of terrible responsibility to your grave, because you were the

self who called another self to come to your place to help fix your toilet. You might just as well blame your toilet for going out of order when it did, or blame any number of causes back to the beginning of time as much as blame yourself. The thing is this: If you can be mistaken in attributing to yourself responsibility, or anything more than a bare trace of causal responsibility, you can also be mistaken about other things, such as being a self with free will. But if you *feel* that you are or possess a self, then you will probably have a time of it denying responsibility for every thought that passes through your brain or the slightest movement of your little toe.

Other people may try to console you for your friend or relative's death by saying that this atrocious event was not your fault. They may also surreptitiously blame you for it, as people sometimes blame those who have had a heart attack for being lax in following the unhealthy injunction to watch your health. But it is quite possible you will disbelieve anyone who says you are not to blame for your friend or relative's death in a vehicular misadventure, perhaps because you can tell that they surreptitiously blame you for it. But that is inconsequential. As someone who feels he is a self, you will likely as not feel responsible for things you could not by any logic or physical law take responsibility for, or no more than a bare trace of causal responsibility. This is not even to consider circumstances in which you may feel *morally* responsible for something that happens when by rights you should not feel this way. And here is where the feeling of being a self with free will really comes in.

Say you asked your friend or relative to help fix your toilet *not* because you needed help fixing your toilet but because you wanted to get back at him for asking you to help him move into his new house the week before when he could have called a moving company, as you did when you moved into your new house, and saved you from having your little toe broken when a heavy piece of furniture fell on it during the move. Morally, inconveniencing your friend or relative just to get back at him for the reasons stated in the previous sentence was not the right thing to do, or so you feel after your

friend or relative's car crashed when it collided with an eighteen-wheel truck in an explosive vehicular misadventure. You did not mean for that to happen. You were just looking for some petty form of payback, some kind of reprisal for the pain of your broken toe—and not even a proportionate reprisal, nor anything illegal or particularly immoral, as these things go. Good luck, though, if you try to feel you were not responsible in an intensely moral sense for your friend or relative's vehicular misadventure. You could *reason* that your part in this misfortune was causally determined and not your fault. But if you *feel* that you are or possess a self then you will probably have a time of it denying responsibility for what happened. If you did not feel this way, what kind of person would that make you, assuming you still felt yourself a person and not some monstrous *thing?*

What is most uncanny about the self is that no one has yet been able to present the least evidence of it. Like the soul, that figure of speech which has long since been snickered out of existence, the self may be felt but never be found. It is a spectral tapeworm that takes its reality from a host organism and grows along with the physical matter in which it is encased. It may even grow beyond its material confines. Some believe that a Big Self enfolds all our little selves. Far fewer, or none, believe that little selves can have littler selves or play host to a number of self-contained selves. Do infants have selves? Fetuses? When do we get a self and can we lose it or have it taken away from us? Putting nonsense aside, some of us are surer than others of our selves. And how many of us want nothing so badly as to be a self-made somebody?

Without a relentless sense of the self, the person, we could not live as we have all these years. Were a personal god to be excluded from everyone's universe, persons would still retain their status. Sensory perceptions, memories, aches, ecstasies: Because these phenomena occur inside the same sack of skin, we suppose that we are enduring, continuous entities, things that serve as the infrastructure for war, romance, athletic competition, and every other genre of human activity. We do

not just have experiences—we *own* them. That is what it means to be a person. No quibbling, everyone who is anyone holds this article of faith, even those who, like the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher David Hume, have done a good job of logically dismantling the reality of selves. But logic cannot exorcise that "I" (ego) which stares back at you in the mirror, just as logic cannot remove the illusion of free will. When someone says she has not been feeling her old self, our thoughts turn to psychology, not metaphysics. To reason or to hold as an article of faith that the self is an illusion may help us to step around the worst pitfalls of the ego, but mitigation is light-years from liberation.

To all human beings, or almost all (see the section *Ego-Death* in this chapter), we seem to be the most real thing going. No one can say with assurance what the world outside of us is like, but inside us we feel self-assured. How does this occur? So far, no one knows. Cognitive psychologists, philosophers of mind, and neuroscientists have their theories, of course, among them those that argue for temporary selves and selves over time, psychophysical selves, neurological selves, objective selves, subjective selves, social selves, transcendent selves, the self as a process and not a "thing," the simultaneous existence and nonexistence of the self. But these and many other self-concepts leave the self as we have always known and experienced it, intact and unharmed. We will all, or almost all, still feel that we are or possess an old-fashioned self. Thus, cognitive psychologists, philosophers of mind, and neuroscientists who extend theories that the self does not exist as we have always believed are not saying that the self does not exist; they are only spreading complex self-constructions that save the self from anyone's questioning its existence. And those who try to prove that selves do not look out at the world from behind our eyeballs might as well be telling us that we have been snatched by the Body Snatchers or coalesced into the Thing.

Within the hierarchy of fabrications that compose our lives—families, countries, gods—the self incontestably ranks

highest. Just below the self is the family, which has proven itself more durable than national or ethnic affiliations, with these in turn outranking god-figures for their staying power. So any progress toward the salvation of humankind will probably begin from the bottom—when our gods have been devalued to the status of refrigerator magnets or lawn ornaments. Following the death rattle of deities, it would appear that nations or ethnic communities are next in line for the boneyard. Only after fealty to countries, gods, and families has been shucked off can we even think about coming to grips with the least endangered of fabrications—the self. However, this hierarchy may change in time as science makes inroads regarding the question of selfhood, which, if the findings are negative, could reverse the progression, with the extinction of the self foretelling that of families, national and ethnic affiliations, and gods. After all, the quintessential sequence by which we free ourselves from our selves and our institutions is still that depicted in the Buddha legend. Born a prince, so the story goes, the nascent Enlightened One, Siddhartha Gautama, embarked on a quest to neutralize his ego by first leaving behind his family, gods, and sociopolitical station—all in one stroke. But Buddha's way requires a near inhuman dedication, and few of us have that kind of stamina. This being so, a speedy and efficient breakdown of fabrications having a worldwide ambit seems remote without the intercession of science, which could at some future date provide a vaccination against the development of "selves" after models already in use to wipe out certain diseases.

Perhaps the only matter of interest about the self is this: Whatever makes us think that we are what we think we are lies in the fact that we have consciousness, which gives us a sense of being somebody, specifically a *human* somebody, whatever that may be, since we do not have a definition of "human" on which there is universal agreement. But we do agree that, if only in practice, we are all real-live selves, since we are all self-conscious. And once we have passed through every door that qualifies our selves in some way—be it by name, nationality, occupation, gender, or shoe size—we then

stand before the door of consciousness—parent of all horrors. And that is all there is to our existence.

No creature caged in a zoo even knows what it is to exist, nor does it crow about being superior to another kind of thing, whether animal, vegetable, or mineral. As for us humans, we reek of our sense of being special. Those hailed as the most conscious among us—the ones needful of a refined type of brainwashing—have made investigations into what it means to be human. Their divergent ramblings on this subject keep our brains buzzing while our bodies go the way of surviving and reproducing—being alive that is, since we do not especially consider the alternative. That being human might mean something very strange and awful, something quite uncanny, is not given a passing thought. If it were, who knows what would happen to us? We could disappear in a puff of smoke or fall through a mirror that has nothing on the other side. Naturally, such possibilities do not lift our spirits the way we need them to be lifted if we are to continue to live as we have all these years.

Nonentities

At the forefront of current studies in selfism and egology, the field of neuroscience has made unmistakable headway. In *Being No One* (2004), for example, the German neurophilosopher Thomas Metzinger provides a theory of how the brain manufactures the subjective sense of our existence as discrete "selves," even though, as Metzinger explains, we would be more rigorously categorized as information-processing systems for which it is expedient in an existential sense to create the illusion of "being someone." In Metzinger's schema, a human being is not a "person" but a mechanistically functioning "phenomenal self-model" that simulates a person. The reason we cannot detect these models is that we see *through* them, and so cannot see the processes of the models themselves.[1] If we could, we would know there is nothing to us but these models. This might be called "Metzinger's Paradox": You cannot know what you really are because then you would know there is nothing to know and nothing to

know it. (What now?) So rather than be know-nothings, we exist in a condition of what Metzinger describes as "naïve realism," with things not being knowable as they really are in themselves, something every scientist and philosopher knows.

The above sketch of Metzinger's central thesis is transparently inadequate, although necessarily so in the present context. By his reasoning and intuitions concerning the nature and workings of consciousness, Metzinger has no equal in his field and impresses one as a thinker whose speculative investigations will someday prove to be the way of reality. By argument and analysis, he has taken consciousness studies as far as possible by the resources available in the early twenty-first century. The project Metzinger has taken upon himself is precisely of the kind whose import is not restricted to the halls of science but is pursued for the far-reaching implications it may have with regard to the life of the average mortal. That said, the following discussion of Metzinger has an ulterior purpose having little to do with the value of his theories.

In his essay "The Shadow of a Puppet Dance: Metzinger, Ligotti and the Illusion of Selfhood" (*Collapse IV,* May 2008), James Trafford breaks down Metzinger's Paradox as follows: "The object 'man' consists of tightly packed layers of simulation, for which naïve realism becomes a necessary prophylactic in order to ward off the terror concomitant with the destruction of our intuitions regarding ourselves and our status in the world: 'Conscious subjectivity is the case in which a single organism has learned to enslave *itself.*'" The closing quote from Metzinger's *Being No One* might be seen as an extension of Zapffe's Paradox, by dint of which we repress from our consciousness all that is startling and dreadful in our lives. For Metzinger, this repression takes the form of the aforesaid naïve realism, which masks the single most startling and dreadful revelation for human beings: that we are not what we think we are. Assuaging our qualms about such a deplorable enlightenment, Metzinger avers that it is "prac-

tically impossible" for us to attain realization of our unreality due to inbuilt manacles of human perception that keep our minds in a dream state.

An interesting fact that seems relevant to Metzinger's study of the illusion of selves is the following: Metzinger is a lucid dreamer. His treatise *Being No One* contains an entire chapter on the knack of being able to "wake up" in one's dreams and recognize that one's consciousness is operating within an illusory zone created by the brain. In that aspect of our lives where we have no say in what happens and are free to choose nothing, the lucid dreamer is no one's fool, or at least not his own. He has peeked behind the curtain of what his consciousness has made and seen through its tricks and traps. This faculty might very well explain Metzinger's inquisitiveness about the nature of waking perception and the possibility that, as Poe wrote: "All that we see or seem / Is but a dream within a dream." These lines sum up the argument of *Being No One*—that we sleep in the self and cannot awake. Yet at the close of this 699-page work, following hard upon an examination of how and why human beings evolved in such a way that we believe we are someone while actually being no one, there seems to be some hedging. "At least in principle," Metzinger writes, "one can wake up from one's biological history. One can grow up, define one's own goals, and become autonomous." So imponderably nebulous, the meaning of these sentences can only be guessed at, since Metzinger leaves them hanging in the air. One is unreservedly stymied as to how this transformation could occur in terms of Metzinger's theory and research. Did he wrap up his treatise prematurely? Does he know something he is not telling us? Or did he just want to end a disillusioning book on an up note?

The same year that he published *Being No One,* Metzinger further clouded the issue. In a lecture at the University of California, Berkeley, he referred to our captivity in the illusion of a self—even though "there is no one" to have this illusion—as "the tragedy of the ego." This phrase fits like a glove into Zapffe's theory of consciousness as a tragic blunder. Disappointingly, Metzinger goes on to say that "the tragedy of

the ego dissolves because nobody is ever born and nobody ever dies." This statement is borrowed from Zen Buddhism (the Heart Sutra) and loses something when translated from a monastery to a university lecture hall. In traditions of enlightenment, the only redress for our fear of death is to wake up to our brain's manufactured sense of self and thus eliminate what we mistakenly think we are before it is too late. But Metzinger's mission as a scientist-philosopher has been to shed light on the neurological mechanisms that make this goal unfeasible. Why, then, does Metzinger speak to his auditors about the "tragedy of the ego," which in all probability none of them thought to be a tragedy before coming to his lecture, and how it "dissolves because nobody is ever born and nobody ever dies"? He seems to be trying to alleviate any fears they might have about their death at the same time he is telling them that they do not exist in the first place. Either way, something is lost that everyone cannot help wanting to hold on to, tragic as that may be. Metzinger's whole routine seems to be based in the same kind of paradoxical double-talk that the world already lives by so as to deny the suffering it must endure and to continue to believe that consciousness is not a problem and that being alive is all right.

But let us not jump to conclusions. In an online forum in which some of the most prestigious figures in consciousness studies responded to Nicolas Humphrey's "A Self Worth Having," where, as quoted earlier, Humphrey says that consciousness is a "wonderfully good thing in its own right," Metzinger sums up his own position on this subject. Here he tolls the same bell as Zapffe when he writes:

> It is not at all clear if the biological form of consciousness, as so far brought about by evolution on our planet, is a *desirable* form of experience, an actual *good in itself*….
>
> *The* theoretical blind spot of current philosophy of mind is the issue of conscious suffering: Thousands of pages are being written about color qualia or the contents of thought, but almost no theoretical work is devoted to ubiquitous phenomenal states like human suffering or simple everyday sadness ("subclinical depression"), or to the phenomenal content associated with panic, despair and melancholy—let alone to the conscious experience of mortality or of losing one's dignity….

> The ethical-normative issue is of greater relevance. If one dares to take a closer look at the actual phenomenology of biological systems on our planet, the many different kinds of conscious suffering are *at least* as dominant a feature as are color vision or conscious thought, both of which appeared only very recently. Evolution is not something to be glorified. One way—out of countless others—to look at biological evolution on our planet is as a process that has created an expanding ocean of suffering and confusion where there previously was none. As not only the simple number of individual conscious subjects, but also the dimensionality of their phenomenal state-spaces is continuously increasing, this ocean is also *deepening.* For me, this is also a strong argument against creating artificial consciousness: We shouldn't add to this terrible mess before we have truly understood what actually is going on here. (Metzinger's emphasis)

Why the disparity in both the tone and substance between Metzinger's conclusion of his book and Berkeley lecture and his online exchange with his colleagues? One could speculate that he felt more comfortable expressing his misgivings about the evolution of human consciousness in a cyber-convocation of his peers than in his high-profile opus and public appearances. In the former outlet, he pulls no punches when he says, "[T]here are aspects of the scientific world-view which may be damaging to our mental well-being, and *that* is what everybody intuitively feels" (Metzinger's emphasis; quoted in Trafford). This is a breathtaking statement for a well-credentialed philosopher to make (as was his inquiry quoted earlier about whether someone could really believe in determinism without going insane). What else could Metzinger mean by this utterance other than that well-used caveat of horror fiction that we are in danger of knowing *things we were not meant to know?* And the worst possible thing we could know—worse than knowing of our descent from a mass of microorganisms–is that we are nobodies not somebodies, puppets not people.

In a later book, *The Ego Tunnel: The Science of the Mind and the Myth of the Self* (2009), Metzinger confronts the problems involved with breaking the news to the average mortal that he or she is actually an average phenomenal self-model and not a person. He wants to assure people that this is not a secret too terrible to know but a truth that will set us free to be better human beings—once we settle on "What *is* a human being?" (since to Metzinger we are not what we think we are)

and once we decide "what *should* a human become?" which is a knotty issue in light of *how* this decision should be made and *who* should make it. One of Metzinger's fears is that some people will sink into what he contemns as "vulgar materialism" and will conclude there is nothing for them in this life but survival, reproduction, and death, with the wise guys of the world saying to themselves in Metzinger's imagined soliloquy: "I don't understand what all these neuroexperts and consciousness philosophers are talking about, but the upshot seems pretty clear to me. The cat is out of the bag: We are gene-copying bio-robots, living out here on a lonely planet in a cold and empty physical universe. … I get the message, and you had better believe I will adjust my behavior to it." This strategy seems to be that of "heroic pessimists" like Miguel de Unamuno (see above), Joshua Foa Dienstag (see above), William Brashear (see above), Friedrich Nietzsche (see below), and any number of others who are already *in the know.* It is surely the strategy that Zapffe observed everyone to be following, the strategy that we must follow if we are to go on living as paradoxical beings who know the score but tamp down their consciousness to keep from knowing it too well. And it works well enough to keep us living as we have all these years. But could the vulgar materialist actually say that he or she is aware of being no one *as a fact* and still go on to pretend that he or she is someone? Would this not be another version of Metzinger's asking "Can one *really* believe in determinism without going insane?" Would such a mental state not only be "practically impossible" but totally impossible, just as it would be impossible for someone to say "I am nothing but a human puppet" and continue to live as he or she had lived before? It does not seem likely that you could ever see yourself as what you are per Metzinger. You would then know the horror and know that you know it: that you are nothing but a human puppet would not be impossible to believe. What now? Answer: Now you go insane. Now our species goes extinct in great epidemics of madness, because now we know that behind the scenes of life there is something pernicious that makes a nightmare of our world. Now we

know that we are uncanny paradoxes. We know that nature has veered into the supernatural by fabricating a creature that cannot and should not exist by natural law, and yet does.

Metzinger's derision of vulgar materialism seems to rest on his optimistic belief that a future technology of consciousness will take us places where the "biological form of consciousness, as so far brought about by evolution on our planet" has not taken us. Beautiful and wonderful places, in Metzinger's admittedly well-informed and extraordinarily humane opinion. If we do not yet know what it is to be human, we have a ballpark idea of what it is to be humane. And Metzinger's preoccupation with the suffering of sentient beings matches that of any pessimist. The only difference is in his opinion of how we may eliminate or greatly ameliorate this suffering. In any event, while Metzinger has been audacious enough to state that "there are aspects of the scientific world-view which may be damaging to our mental well-being, and *that* is what everybody intuitively feels," he himself feels that everybody may not always feel that way and that the risk-benefit calculation will add up in our favor. What else could a neurophilosopher believe—that we should give up on ourselves and go extinct? Metzinger *must* have faith that once the rest of humanity has seen through the game, we will—in all sincerity and not as pretenders—play through to a world in which day by day, in every way, we are getting better and better. But that will take time—lots of it.

Even in the twenty-first century there are people who are incapable of abiding Darwin's theory unless they can reconcile it with their Creator and His design. Losing hold of these shielding eidolons would make them honor-bound to become unhinged, so they might say, because the world as they knew it would molder away in their palsied arms. Unprepared to receive the evidence, they run from it as any dreamer runs from a horror at his heels. They think that when this horror closes in on them they will die of madness to see its shape and know the touch of what they believe should not be. No doubt they would survive the experience, as so many have done before them. We have already weathered torrents of knowledge we

were not meant to know yet were doomed to know. But how much more can we take? How will the human race feel about knowing that there is no human race—that there is no one? Would this be the end of the greatest horror tale ever told? Or might it be the reinstatement of the way things had been before we had lives of our own? For now, those who cannot abide even Darwin's theory without the Creator beside them seem to be safe. To quote Lovecraft on the subject of forbidden knowledge, "The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little." But perhaps they will one day. Then the time may come to engage Zapffe's solution for saving the future from the curse of consciousness.

While we wait breathlessly for the test results of neuroscientists, people will still be knocking on your door to hawk some gimmick that will get you into their heaven. Naturally, these salesmen of the sacred do not have a clue regarding what things are like in heaven. Are there levels of heaven? Could someone be in heaven and not know it? And how often have we heard that many who are alive today will not "taste death" but instead will proceed directly to paradise when the rapture is upon us? This means that billions have already dropped dead with the unfulfilled hope of not having to suffer the throes of the unsaved. What disillusionment must have incommoded them as they lay in extremis. Death would not be so bad if we could just disappear into it without any irksome preliminaries. But even those who expect the doors of heaven will open for them would prefer not to make their entrance after the physical trials of fighting for the life that God gave them. For the rest of us, the carousel of consciousness spins round and round, enlightening us only to the bloodcurdling probability that the worst will likely be saved for last. And even those who experience being alive as quite all right will have to live through such tacked-on endings as dying in a vehicular misadventure or lying abed sucking tubes.

Life is like a story that is spoiled by an unsatisfactory resolution of preceding events. There are no retroactive fix-ups for the corpses we shall become. "All's well that ends well" is well

enough in the short-run. “In the long run,” as British economist John Maynard Keynes reportedly stated, “we are all dead.” This does not sit well with us by way of an ending. But it is not as if we can choose how things will end for us, or for those yet unborn.

Unpersons

In his novel translated as *Moment of Freedom,* which was published ten years before his suicide in 1976, the Norwegian author and cultural critic Jens Bjørneboe wrote that “he who hasn’t experienced a full depression alone and over a long period of time—he is a child.” Aside from being indemonstrable in its validity, Bjørneboe’s bilious discharge is also too restrictive in esteeming his personal class of suffering as the sole rite of passage to maturity as a conscious individual. Depression is only one of the psychopathologies that could be selected to make the bombastic claim that those who have not been affected by it in full and over a long period of time belong on a playground or in a playpen. But it is serviceable as an example of a psychological disease with which most people have had some experience in one or more of its varieties.

The statistically prevailing form of this disease is “atypical depression.” Less common and more deadly is “melancholic depression.” But whatever family name a given case of depression goes by, it has the same effect: sabotaging the network of emotions that make it seem as if you and your world mean something in some meaningful way. It is then you discover that your “old self” is not the inviolable thing you thought it was, nor is the rest of your “old reality.” Both are as frail as our bodies and may be perforated as readily, deflating all that we thought meaningful about ourselves and our world.

What meaning our lives may seem to have is the work of a relatively well-constituted emotional system. As consciousness gives us the sense of being persons, our psychophysiology is responsible for making us into personalities who believe the existential game to be worth playing. We

may have memories that are unlike those of anyone else, but without the proper emotions to liven those memories they might as well reside in a computer file as disconnected bits of data that never unite into a tailor-made individual for whom things seem to mean something. You can conceptualize that your life has meaning, but if you do not *feel* that meaning then your conceptualization is meaningless and you are nobody. The only matters of weight in our lives are colored by rainbows or auroras of regulated emotion which give one a sense of that "old self." But a major depression causes your emotions to evaporate, reducing you to a shell of a person standing alone in a drab landscape. Emotions are the substrate for the illusion of being a somebody among somebodies as well as for the substance we see, or think we see, in the world. Not knowing this ground-level truth of human existence is the equivalent of knowing nothing at all.

Although varying in intensity and nature, our emotions must seem ever-stable in their concatenation, just as a mixed drink must be made with specific ingredients in the same relative amounts so that they may blend into a vodka martini or a piña colada. United, our emotions ostensibly form a master self to which anomalous secondary selves may be compared for quality. Even as they are ever trading places or running together within us, clearly cut or amorphous, the experience of these biological twitterings makes it nearly impossible to doubt that they will stay with us as far as we can see into the future. Ask any couple who cannot imagine being without each other, a vital fiction without which, besides the fact that it often leads to procreation, no society could exist. It would have no reason to do so, because reason is merely the mouthpiece of emotion. Hume, who specialized in detaining his readers with obvious but unspoken realities, wrote in his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40) that "reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions." To free reason from this slavery would mean our becoming rationalists without a cause, paralytics crippled by mentation.

In speaking of depression and its defining effect of driving its victim to the point of caring nothing for anything, the

American talk-show host Dick Cavett once remarked that "when you're downed by this affliction, if there were a curative magic wand on the table eight feet away, it would be too much trouble to go over and pick it up." No better elucidation has ever been proffered vis-à-vis the uselessness of reason in the absence of emotion. In the recumbence of depression, your information-gathering system collates its intelligence and reports to you these facts: (1) there is nothing to do; (2) there is nowhere to go; (3) there is nothing to be; (4) there is no one to know. Without meaning-charged emotions keeping your brain on the straight and narrow, you would lose your balance and fall into an abyss of lucidity. And for a conscious being, lucidity is a cocktail without ingredients, a crystal clear concoction that will leave you hung over with reality. In perfect knowledge there is only perfect nothingness, which is perfectly painful if what you want is meaning in your life.

William S. Burroughs said it rightly in his journals. Using his streetwise voice, he wrote: "Love? What is it? The most natural painkiller what there is." You may become curious, though, about what happened to that painkiller should depression take hold and expose your love—whatever its object—as just one of the many intoxicants that muddled your consciousness of the human tragedy. You may also want to take a second look at whatever struck you as a person, place, or thing of "beauty," a quality that lives only in the neurotransmitters of the beholder. (Aesthetics? What is it? A matter for those not depressed enough to care nothing about anything, that is, those who determine almost everything that is supposed to matter to us. Protest as you like, neither art nor an aesthetic view of life are distractions granted to everyone.) In depression, all that once seemed beautiful, or even startling and dreadful, is nothing to you. The image of a cloud-crossed moon is not in itself a purveyor of anything mysterious or mystical; it is only an ensemble of objects represented to us by our optical apparatus and perhaps processed as a memory.

This is the great lesson the depressive learns: Nothing in the world is inherently compelling. Whatever may be really "out there" cannot project itself as an affective experience. It

is all a vacuous affair with only a chemical prestige. Nothing is either good or bad, desirable or undesirable, or anything else except that it is made so by laboratories inside us producing the emotions on which we live. And to live on our emotions is to live arbitrarily, inaccurately—imparting meaning to what has none of its own. Yet what other way is there to live? Without the ever-clanking machinery of emotion, everything would come to a standstill. There would be nothing to do, nowhere to go, nothing to be, and no one to know. The alternatives are clear: to live falsely as pawns of affect, or to live factually as depressives, or as individuals who know what is known to the depressive. How advantageous that we are not coerced into choosing one or the other, neither choice being excellent. One look at human existence is proof enough that our species will not be released from the stranglehold of emotionalism that anchors it to hallucinations. That may be no way to live, but to opt for depression would be to opt out of existence as we consciously know it.

Of course, individuals may recover from depression. But in that event they had better keep their consciousness of what they went through at heel. Otherwise they might start thinking that being alive is not as all right as they once thought it was when they were being shuttled about by a relatively well-constituted emotional system. The same applies to bodily systems of any kind, such as the immune system. Because when one of your systems goes haywire, you cannot function as you think you should. You may not even be able to think about anything except how much vomit, nasal mucus, phlegm, and watery stool you are discharging from your body when your immune system cannot withstand an onslaught from a viral or bacterial infection. If that is the way you were all the time, you could not go on as a well-constituted being, which means you could not go on as your old self, whatever that might have been. But chances are you will get better after one or more of your systems has gone haywire, and as a newly well-constituted being you will probably think, “I’m back to being the real me.” However, you might as truthfully think that the real you is the one who was sick, not

the one with well-constituted systems working together so cooperatively that you do not even notice them. You cannot go around thinking that the sick you is the real you, though, or you would turn into someone who suffers from chronic anxiety about all the ways your systems can go haywire. And *that* would become the real you.

Freaks of Salvation

Down-Going

"Depressing" is the adjective that ordinary folk affix to the life-perspectives expressed by men such as Zapffe, Schopenhauer, and Lovecraft. The doctrines of world-class religions, dolorous as they may be, will never be thus defamed, because they are perceived to be "uplifting" by ordinary folk. Panglossian falsehoods convene the crowd; discouraging truths disperse it. The reason: It is depression not madness that cows us, demoralization not insanity that we dread, disillusionment of the mind not its derangement that imperils our culture of hope. An epidemic of depression would quiet those chattering voices in our heads, stopping life dead in its tracks. Providentially, we are endowed with enough manic enthusiasm to keep us plowing onward and making more of ourselves, bragging all the while about what billions of years of evolution have bidden every species to do anyway.

Zapffe, Schopenhauer, and Lovecraft fared well enough without surrendering themselves to life-affirming hysterics. This is a risky thing for anyone to do, but it is even more risky for writers, because anti-vital convictions will demote their work to a lower archive than that of wordsmiths who capitulate to positive thinking, or at least follow the maxim of being equivocal when speaking of our species. Everyone wants to keep the door open on the possibility that our lives are not MALIGNANTLY USELESS. Even highly educated readers do not want to be told that their lives are an evolutionary contingency—and nothing else—and that meaning is not what people think it means.[1]

For Schopenhauer, the fallout from his negations has been that he takes up far less floor space in the museum of modern thought than does his fellow German and antagonist Friedrich Nietzsche. Schopenhauer promises nothing but extinction for the individual following the postmortem recall of his "true nature" as a tiny parcel of the personless and ever-roiling Will. Nietzsche borrows from religion and sermonizes

that, although we will not be delivered into the afterlives of his ecclesiastic models, we must be willing in spirit to reprise this life again and again to its tiniest detail for all eternity.[2] As unappealing as repeating our lives even once may seem to some of us, we are not the ones who make a writer's reputation. This is the bailiwick of philosophical trendsetters, who discovered in Nietzsche the most spellbinding conundrum in the history of the mind. All the better for the perseverance of his corpus, which has supplied his exegetes with lifetimes of interpretation, argumentation, and general schismatic disharmony—all the purposeful activities that any religionist, with or without a deity, goes for.

Among other things, Nietzsche is famed as a promoter of human survival, just as long as enough of the survivors follow his lead as a *perverted pessimist*—one who has consecrated himself to loving life exactly because it is the worst thing imaginable, a sadomasochistic joyride through the twists and turns of being unto death. Nietzsche had no problem with human existence as a tragedy born of consciousness—parent of all horrors. This irregular pessimism is the antinomy of the "normal" pessimism of Schopenhauer, who is philosophy's red-headed stepchild because he is unequivocally on record as having said that being alive is not—and can never be—all right. Even his most admiring commentators, who do not find the technical aspects of his output to be offputting, pull up when he openly waxes pessimistic or descants on the Will as an unself-consciously stern master of all being, a cretinous force that makes everything do what it does, an imbecilic puppeteer that sustains the ruckus of our world. For these offenses, his stature is rather low compared to that of other major thinkers, as is that of all philosophers who bear an unconcealed grudge against life.

Although both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche spoke only to an audience of atheists, Schopenhauer erred—from a public relations stance—by not according human beings any special status among the world of things organic and inorganic or trucking in any meaning to our existence. Contra Schopenhauer, Nietzsche not only took religious readings of life seri-

ously enough to deprecate them at great length, but was hell-bent on replacing them with goal-oriented values and a sense of meaning that even nonbelievers beg for like dogs—some project in which individuals may lose (or find) themselves.

Key to Nietzsche's popularity with atheistic amoralists is his materialistic mysticism, a sleight of mind that makes the world's meaninglessness into something meaningful and refashions fate into freedom before our eyes. As for Schopenhauer's cattle-drive existence in which an unknowable force (the Will) herds us along—that had to go. In the form of a diverting fiction, it might well be worth its conceptual weight in shivers of uncanny horror; but as a proposed reality, it is self-evidently depressing.

In confederacy with those whom he believed himself to have surpassed in the race toward an undefined destiny, Nietzsche did what he could to keep the human pageant strolling toward … wherever. Even though he had the clarity of mind to recognize that values did not grow on trees nor were writ on stone tablets, he duped himself into thinking that it was possible to create them. But how these values would be created and what they would be he could not say. After demolishing the life-rejecting faith of the Crucified, Nietzsche handed down his own commandments through the Antichrist-like messiah Zarathustra, who was groomed to take over Christianity's administration of the Western world and keep it afloat with counterfeit funds. Carrying around a sackload of unrealities from here to the eternal return, perhaps no one has ever been as "normal" as Nietzsche.

Why did this nay-saying yes-man believe it was so important to keep up our esprit de corps by fending off the crisis of nihilism he predicted as forthcoming? Nietzsche could not have thought that at some point people were going to turn their heads to the wall due to a paucity of values, which may run low sometimes but will never run out. Those who were supposed to have gone running into the streets in a funk of foundationlessness have survived without a hitch: Nihilistic or not, they still carried home an armful of affirmations. To publish or perish is not a question that professional thinkers

have to think about for long. And whatever moral crisis lies ahead will have to take place in an environment undamaged by nihilism.

As a threat to human continuance, nihilism is as dead as God. (See James E. Edwards, *The Plain Sense of Things: The Fate of Religion in the Age of Normal Nihilism,* 1997.) To do away with one's values is rather impossible, an ideal to be imagined until one is seized by a natural end. Schopenhauer, a virtuoso of life's devaluation, knew that. But Nietzsche fretted about those unborn values he imagined his work would inspire, worrying over them as would an expectant parent concerned that his name, his blood, and his codes both moral and genetic be bodied forth by generations fading over the hills of time. Leaving no values that posterity could not cook up on its own, Nietzsche was withal an admirable opponent of enslaving values from the past. In their place, he left nothing. And for that we should thank him.

Possibly stolen from Nietzsche is what has been tagged as Zapffe's Paradox—where human beings deceive themselves into thinking their lives are something they are not, namely, worth living. In his *Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Nietzsche wrote:

> It is an eternal phenomenon: The insatiable will always find a way, by means of an illusion spread over things, to detain its creatures in life and to compel them to live on. One is chained by the Socratic joy of knowing and the delusion of being able thereby to heal the eternal wound of existence; another is ensnared by art's seductive veil of beauty fluttering before his eyes; yet another by the metaphysical consolation that beneath the whirl of appearances eternal life flows on indestructibly—to say nothing of the more common and almost more forceful illusions the will has at hand at every moment. (*The Birth of Tragedy,* trans. Walter Kaufmann)

One can only rue the fact that Nietzsche did not unfold this observation into a life-negating pessimism, as did Zapffe, rather than into a pessimism that teaches us "what it means 'to be frightened'"—"a pessimism of *strength.*" But by the time Nietzsche wrote these words in his "Attempt at a Self-Criticism," published as a preface to the 1886 edition of *The Birth of Tragedy,* it was too late for his conversion, or reconversion, to a purist's pessimism. He had already hit the road toward what would indeed frighten average mortals, a set of

persons in which he did not include himself, or did not want to include himself. Zapffe did include himself among this set, and his analysis of those who opted out of it fits Nietzsche to a tee: "In such cases, a person may be obsessed with destructive joy, dislodging the whole artificial apparatus of his life and starting with rapturous horror to make a clean sweep of it. The horror stems from the loss of all sheltering values; the rapture from his by now ruthless identification and harmony with our nature's deepest secret—the biological unsoundness, the enduring disposition for doom." In its life-negating aspect, pessimism lost a great champion when Nietzsche became joyful about the frightful, a psychic stand that in itself is a paradox if ever there was one.

Futurephilia

After Nietzsche, pessimism was revaluated by some, rejuvenated by others, and still spurned as depressing by average mortals, who continued to recite their most activating illusion: "Today is better than yesterday and tomorrow will be better still." While being alive may be all right for the moment, the future is really the place for a person to be, at least as far as we care to see into it. Lovecraft is a figure of exceeding intrigue here because much of his fiction is based on a clutch of godlike beings whose very presence in the universe degrades the idea of betterment in human life into a cosmic miscalculation. Azathoth the Blind Idiot God, Nyarlathotep the Crawling Chaos, Cthulhu the Dead Dreamer: These are some of the entities that symbolize the Lovecraftian universe as a place without sense, meaning, or value. This perspective is memorably expressed in Lovecraft's poem "Nemesis":

> I have seen the dark universe yawning
> Where the black planets roll without aim,
> Where they roll in their horror unheeded,
> Without knowledge or lustre or name.

These lines and others like them are not cordially received by votaries of the future, who will deny their vision or treat it as

only a literary diversion, which in effect is all that it is, along with every glyph and scribble ever recorded since Gilgamesh sojourned in the land of the dead. More popular among fans of occult fiction are the canonical texts of Theosophy, Anthroposophy, Scientology, G. I. Gurdjieff's Fourth Way, the Kabbalah, and so on.

Among this select bibliography of arcane studies should be added the curiosa of "transhumanism," a zealous type of utopian thought underwritten by the belief that day by day we are getting closer and closer to building a better human. Like believers in libertarian free will, transhumanists believe we can make ourselves. But this is impossible. Because of evolution, we *got made.* We did not bring ourselves out of the primeval ooze. And everything we have done since we became a species has been a consequence of being made. No matter what we do, it will be what we were made to do—and nothing else. We may try to make something of ourselves, but we cannot take over our own evolution. We made antibiotics because we were made to be the kind of beings who make such things as antibiotics. That changed our condition without changing us, being as we are the kind of creatures who do things and make things, yet are not in the business of getting ourselves made. Nature had plans for us and still does. One of those plans seems to be the dream of transhumanism, which may just be a plan to unmake us. If so, we are not going to alter that plan simply because we imagine we can make a new person with new evolutionary programs that we will write. We know how to survive and we know how to reproduce. We know how to do many things, but we do not know what to do with ourselves that is over and above our preset patterns. Some of us only think we do. We are not even part of the process of *getting remade.* We are following orders, as we have always done, that nature is forever barking out.

As humans conceived transhumanism, transhumanists have conceived posthumanism, a far-off condition in which none will live as we have all these years but will have evolved into something beyond our present selves. And then what?

Have the transhumanists really thought this through? And how could they? We have no idea where our next thought is coming from, not excluding the thoughts of transhumanists. We do have thoughts, but we do not know what we are going to make of them. How, then, are we to know what to make of ourselves? Maybe we could outdo posthumanity, or at least do something that would not take as long and would be no less useless. But it is not as if being posthuman is an idea first conceived in the late twentieth century. In its search for the "good," or at least the better, it recapitulates our most ancient fantasies. Like a song we feel we have heard even though we are hearing it for the first time, the machinations of transhumanists call to us from the past, and even from a prehistorical Eden of perfect existence, depending on whether or not one likes their song or cares for a homecoming in Eden. But these machinations also sound like something that was over the moment it began—old, stale, nothing.

By definition, transhumanists are dissatisfied with what we are as a species. Naturally, they think that being alive is all right—so much so, in fact, that they cannot stand the idea of not being alive and have envisioned strategies for staying alive forever. Their problem is that they need being alive to be vastly more all right than it is. And the power of positive thinking is not enough to get them where they want to go. They are past all that, or would like to be. They are also past believing in God or an afterlife of eternal bliss. To a believer, transhumanism would be a useless appendage to what they already believe, as well as an offense against *Him who made us as He made us,* with nature as the go-between, and long ago laid down the ways in which we can make ourselves better and better. Those ways may be hard to follow, but the alternative is the despair of living without hope of an unimaginably better future. For the believer's alternative to despair, transhumanists have substituted their own. Yet while transhumanists operate on the assumption that we will massively profit when we self-mutate into posthumans, the upshot of their program is still unknown. It could begin a dy-

namic new chapter in the history of our race, or it could trumpet the end of us. Either way, the prophesized leap will be jumpstarted by all manner of gadgetry and will somehow involve artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, genetic engineering, and other habiliments of high technology. These will be the instruments of the New Genesis, the Logos of tomorrow. Or so says one desperate group of scientific thinkers.

For a less desperate group of scientific thinkers, posthumanism is a chimera and will not occur: We will go on with our lives as stumblebums of the same old story. Understandably, the transhumanist view is more arousing than old-fogy humanism precisely because an apocalypse has been inserted as a wild card. (See Bill Joy's "The future doesn't need us," *Wired,* 2000.) In this sense, transhumanism is a secular retelling of the Christian rapture, and some of its true believers foresee it as happening within the lifetime of *many who are alive today,* just as the early Christians believed in an impending Judgment Day. Perhaps at some time in the future, such predictions will not have to take into account eschatological contingencies and we can all relax, secure in the knowledge that day by day, in every way, we are *getting made* better and better.

Transhumanism encapsulates a long-lived error among the headliners of science: In a world without a destination, we cannot even break ground on our Tower of Babel, and no amount of rush and hurry on our part will change that. That we are going nowhere is not a curable condition; that we must go nowhere at the fastest possible velocity just might be curable, though probably not. And what difference would it make to retard our progress to nowhere? Zapffe reviled technological advancements and the discoveries to which they led, since those interested in such things would be cheated of the distraction of finding them out for themselves at whatever pace they chose. Every human activity is a tack for killing time, and it seemed criminal to him that people should have their time already killed for them by explorers, inventors, and innovators of every stripe. Zapffe himself re-

served his leisure hours for that most purposive time-killer—mountain climbing.

As we should know by now, it is as easy to make fun of religious or scientific visionaries as it is to idolize them. Which attitude is adopted depends on whether or not they tell you what you want to hear. Given the excitements promised by the transhumanism, odds are that it will collect a clientele of hopefuls who want to get a foot in the future, for nobody doubts that tomorrow will be better than today. Yet one possibility transhumanists have not wrestled with is that the ideal being standing at the end of evolution may deduce that the best of all possible worlds is useless, if not malignant, and that the self-extinction of our future selves would be the optimal course to take. They have also failed to reflect upon those aspects of the scientific world-view which may be damaging to our mental well-being. In that case, transhumanists will not get as far as stage one in their mission before they must head back to the conspiracy against the human race and be reeducated in the art of self-deceptive paradox.

Many people in this world are always looking to science to save them from something. But just as many, or more, prefer old and reputable belief systems and their sectarian offshoots for salvation. So they trust in the deity of the Old Testament, an incontinent dotard who soiled Himself and the universe with His corruption, a low-budget divinity passing itself off as the genuine article. (Ask the Gnostics.) They trust in Jesus Christ, a historical cipher stitched together like Frankenstein's monster out of parts robbed from the graves of messiahs dead and buried—a savior on a stick. They trust in the virgin-pimping Allah and his Drum Major Mohammed, a prophet-come-lately who pioneered a new genus of humbuggery for an emerging market of believers that was not being adequately served by existing religious products. They trust in anything that authenticates their importance as persons, tribes, societies, and particularly as a species that will endure in this world and perhaps in an afterworld that may be uncertain in its reality and unclear in its layout, but which sates

their craving for values *not of this earth*—that depressing, meaningless place their consciousness must sidestep every day.[3] Sure enough, then, writers such as Zapffe, Schopenhauer, and Lovecraft only wrote their ticket to marginality when they failed to affirm the worth and wonder of humanity, the validity of its values (whether eternal or provisional), and, naturally, a world without a foreseeable end, or at least a world whose end no one wants to see.

Buddhanomics

Like many faiths and philosophies that go against the Western grain, Buddhism has baited legions of those in the cognitive vanguard. This religion is to be praised both for its lack of an almighty god-figure and for its gateway teaching of the Four Noble Truths. The first of these truths is the equation between the life of the average mortal and *dukkha* (roughly "suffering," but really whatever state of ill-being you care to name). The second is that craving anything in this world—good physical or mental health, long life, happiness, or even the elimination of craving—is the provenance of all suffering. These Two Noble Truths sit atop a religion that is incomparable for its prescriptions for salvation. These prescriptions begin with the Third Noble Truth, that there is a way out of suffering, and continue with the Fourth Noble Truth—that the way to be released from the leg-irons of suffering is to follow the Noble Eightfold Path, a list of things-to-do and things-not-to-do much like the Old Testament Decalogue, except not as plainly spoken or easygoing.

By laying a heavy emphasis on human life as something that needs to be drastically reworked due to the First Noble Truth of *dukkha,* Buddhism has been disparaged as pessimistic. Naturally, Buddhists deny that their religion is any such thing. It is a system for uncovering our true nature–and nothing else. Nevertheless, Buddhism and pessimism cannot be pried loose from each other. The likeness between them is simply too pronounced to be overlooked. Buddhists claim that they are not pessimists but realists. Pessimists make the same claim. Buddhists also claim they are not pessimists be-

cause their founder's teachings showed a way out of suffering for all sentient beings. Pessimists also have their plans toward this end. Ask Zapffe. Ask Mainländer. Or ask Schopenhauer about working toward a denial of the Will, which is the cause of *dukkha,* the facets of which have been identified by the Ven. Dr. Thanat Inthisan, and many other Buddhist wise men, to include "dissatisfaction, imperfection, pain, impermanence, disharmony, discomfort, irritation, war, incompleteness, insufficiency" as well as the physical and mental suffering of "birth, decay, disease, and death." Calling oneself a realist is as much the privilege of the Buddhist as it is that of the pessimist. But to designate Buddhism as anything but pessimism is just a matter of semantics. The only real discrepancy between the two philosophies is that hundreds of millions of Buddhists have accepted *dukkha* as the primary reality of existence. How queer that pessimists cannot boast such numbers. While it is not perceived as such by followers of this ancient religion, the disavowed fact is this: *Buddhism is pessimism*. Yet whereas the pessimism that dares speak its name is met with near universal incredulity, Buddhism may advertise as truth what no pessimist can prove—that suffering is basic to human existence and it should be the work of our lives to liberate ourselves from its grasp. This double standard is flatly an outrage of logic. Of course, one must always keep in mind the latitude religions are permitted by virtue of the fact that their beliefs cannot be objectively corroborated and must be taken on faith, pessimistic though they may be.

Unlike the practical uniformity of pessimists, not all Buddhists line up on the same side even in some of the broadest aspects of their beliefs. (Ask Stephen Batchelor, author of *Buddhism Without Beliefs,* 1998.) For instance, there are differing opinions among Buddhists regarding *anatta* ("no-self") and how it relates to reincarnation, because if there is no self, then what is it that gets reborn? To this question are loads of learned exegeses. One belief held by many Buddhists is that human beings are bits and pieces that add up to noth-

ing, things of parts, hollow puppets—non-beings that think they are something they are not. Other Buddhists believe that this is only half the story: Things both exist and do not exist; things are not what they seem nor are they other than they seem; things are many and they are one; everything is nothing, including nothing.

Along with every other religion, Buddhism is a compilation of do-it-yourself projects, and some of them, such as Pure Land Buddhism, are only lightweight versions of the faiths scantily detailed here. This principle has its parallel in every philosophy, ideology, and bag of myths that has ever been presented to the world. Because no two minds are contoured alike, no one system or collocation of systems will ever be sized to fit all. If truth is what you seek, then the examined life will only take you on a long ride to the limits of solitude and leave you by the side of the road with *your* truth and nothing else. This gives leave to believers in anything to have an opinion about whatever they like. For Buddhists, though, this is a problem, because clinging to opinions, or whatever else ordinary folk cling to, is an obstruction to becoming a right-minded practitioner of Buddhism. But you can believe that in Buddhist law, or in someone's opinion of Buddhist law, there are allowance conditions that stipulate when clinging is not really clinging. All religions must have allowance conditions or they would implode upon themselves by the pressure of their own doctrines.

Since Buddhism's only objective is attaining enlightenment, that high road to nirvana (see below), it is at one with other religions in pitching a brighter future for believers in deliverance from the woes of this world. One problem: Human beings are rarely so sensitive to the woes of this world that they feel a pressing need to reject all cravings for the pleasures of this world, as Buddhism would have them do. And it seems that any amount of pleasure is pleasure enough to get us to keep the faith that being alive is all right for everyone, or almost everyone, and will certainly be all right for any children we cause to be delivered into this world. How else could we stave off a craving to become extinct?

The good news for Buddhism as a for-profit religion is that there are more than enough people who are sensitive to the woes of this world, and who are willing to let go of their cravings for its pleasures, to seek the extinction of their everyday selves in the oasis of nirvana (absolute beatitude, permanent detachment from all attachment to a benighted way of life, a step-off from the cycle of death and rebirth, or whatever happy thing you like). Reaching this oasis may happen during an individual's lifetime or could be delayed for the next round of reincarnation, when one will have another chance to cut oneself loose from karma, a doctrine that Buddhists borrowed from the Jains and the Hindus.

Leaving aside reincarnation and the mental gymnastics it foists on the believer, the central focus of Buddhism's three-ring circus remains the state or non-state of enlightenment, which, like Jesus' ethereal theme park, is an appetizing carrot suspended in the darkness of life's suffering, if you are one of those who are sensitive enough to life's suffering. However, to get that carrot you must first kowtow to dogmatic authorities that cannot be told apart from those of Christianity, spiritual ministers who strong-arm you to do some things and not do others under pain of not becoming enlightened.

But here is the real catch: If you want to become enlightened you will never become enlightened, because in Buddhism wanting things is just the thing that keeps you from getting the thing you want. Less circuitously, if you want to end your suffering, you will never end your suffering. This is the "wanting paradox," or "paradox of desire," and Buddhists are at the ready with both rational and non-rational propositions as to why this paradox is not a paradox. How to understand these propositions is past understanding, because, per Buddhism, there is nothing to understand and no one to understand it. And as long as you think there is something to understand and someone to understand it, you are doomed. Trying for this understanding is the most trying thing of all. Yet trying *not* to try for it is just as trying. There is nothing more futile than to consciously look for something to save you. But consciousness makes this fact seem other-

wise. Consciousness makes it seem as if (1) there is something to do; (2) there is somewhere to go; (3) there is something to be; (4) there is someone to know. This is what makes consciousness the parent of all horrors, the thing that makes us try to do something, go somewhere, be something, and know someone, such as ourselves, so that we can escape our MALIGNANTLY USELESS being and think that being alive is all right rather than that which *should not be.*

The Buddhist "wanting paradox" might be regarded as correlative to Zapffe's Paradox (the paradox of conscious beings attempting to disclaim their consciousness of the flagrantly joyless possibilities of their lives). The difference between Buddhism's Paradox and Zapffe's Paradox is that the latter is not amenable to being resolved, explained away, or denied, either rationally or non-rationally. It can only be left unacknowledged so that we can continue to live as we have all these years, or at least as long as we can before the paradox demands acknowledgment to the extent that we cannot live with ourselves as beings whose existence is terribly false and paradoxical, things so uncanny that we can no longer even look at one another or hold our heads steady. Until that day, we will keep living as obstinate selves who affirm that being conscious is an enlightened way to be and that being alive is all right.

In the marketplace of salvation, enlightenment seems the best buy ever offered, if only at first blush. Rather than floundering in a world that is not worth the emptiness it is written on, you may sign up to attain a conclusive vision of what's what and what's not. Broadly speaking, enlightenment is the correction of our consciousness and the establishment of a state of being in which muddy illusion is washed away and a diamond of understanding shines through. This is the supreme desert … if it may be had, if it has any reality outside the pat or cryptic locutions that advert to it.

Millions of people have spent their lives, and some have even lost their minds, trying to win enlightenment without

ever comprehending, as they sucked their last breath, what it was they had gambled to get. Had they attained enlightenment without being aware of it? Are there stages of enlightenment (maybe, depending on the type of Buddhism to which one subscribes) and how far had they gotten? In his *One Taste: Daily Reflections on Integral Spirituality,* Ken Wilber, a widely known and highly influential multidisciplinary scholar and theorist of spiritual traditions, reported that he asked one Zen Buddhist master "how many truly enlightened —deeply enlightened—Japanese Zen masters there were alive today." The master replied, "Not more than a dozen." Another Zen master put the number of fully enlightened individuals in the East at one thousand throughout Zen Buddhism's history. Wilber's conclusion: "Thus, without in any way belittling the truly stunning contributions of the glorious Eastern traditions, the point is fairly straightforward: radical transformative spirituality is extremely rare, anywhere in history, and anywhere in the world. (The numbers for the West are even more depressing. I rest my case.)" Indeed, enlightenment by Buddhism truly seems to be a well-defended redoubt whose location cannot be triangulated by speech, the only rule being that if you have to ask yourself if you have arrived, then it is certain you have not.

Ego-Death

As we have seen, Buddhism's ways and means to illumination are full of shortcomings and vexations. Nevertheless, it does seem that some have reached a state corresponding to that of Buddhist enlightenment as delineated in scads of scriptures, diaries, copyrighted publications, and public depositions. Curiously, these charmed individuals appear to have come to this state unwarned, sometimes as a result of physical trauma or a Near-Death Experience (NDE).

Perhaps the capital instance of *enlightenment by accident* is that of U. G. Krishnamurti. Although U. G. gave no credence to any doctrine of awakening, he claimed to have experienced "clinical death" at the age of forty-nine, after which he returned to life as the kind of being glorified in the literature of

enlightenment. Through his clinical death and its aftermath, which he called a "calamity" due to the pain and confusion he felt during this process, U. G. was transformed.

For decades prior to his calamity, U. G. was an earnest seeker who sought enlightenment by effort rather than by accident. But his efforts got him nowhere, and he ended up financially drained. By chance he met a woman who was willing to support him, and for years he was something of a layabout. It was while living with this woman that his calamity struck. Upon recovering from his calamity, he had what he once looked for and in disgust had given up trying to find. U. G. was no longer the person he once was, for now he was someone whose ego had been erased. In this state, he had all the self-awareness of a tree frog. To his good fortune, he had no problem with his new way of functioning. He did not need to accept it, since by his report he had lost all sense of having an ego that needed to accept or reject anything. How could someone who had ceased to participate in the commerce of selves, who had inadvertently forfeited his personhood, believe or not believe in anything so outlandish as enlightenment … or any other spiritual vendibles, none of which are evident in the least and all of which are as outmoded as the gods of antiquity or tribal deities with names that sound comical to believers in "real" religions?[4]

While it may seem that U. G. had become a zombie, in a non-philosophical sense, his post-calamity life was nothing like that. Until his death in 2007, he spent much of his time berating people who came to him for spiritual succor. Cantankerous and opinionated as some of the more famous masters of Zen Buddhism, U. G. arrestingly and often humorously told those who had made the pilgrimage to his door that everything they believed about anything was wrong. Few of them could get a word in edgewise as he assassinated all that humanity has ever held sacred. Some would view U. G.'s disrespect for spirituality to be in happy rapport with the nature of enlightenment, which they have been taught cannot be pinned down by doctrines of any kind. Others would deny this assertion, perhaps because they have been indoctrinated

to believe that both irreverence and deference toward the transcendent are off the mark once one has "awakened." Neither side of this squabble would have tempted U. G. What he enunciated in interviews is the near impossibility of human beings, except perhaps one in a billion, to think of themselves only as animals born to survive and reproduce.

As Zapffe had written long before U. G. began slurring every belief in the world, mental activity beyond the basic programs of our animalism has led only to suffering. ("In the beast, suffering is self-confined; in man, it knocks holes into a fear of the world and a despair of life.") U. G. never spoke of a solution for what consciousness has made of our lives. We are captured by illusions and there is no way out. That U. G. came upon a way out, as he told his countless interrogators, was nothing but luck, nothing he knew anything about or could pass on to others. Yet they still came to him and asked for his help. To their pleas he immediately replied he could not help them, nor could they help themselves. No help could be had from any sector in which they searched. They could seek deliverance their entire lives and make it all the way to their deathbeds with nothing but the same useless questions and useless answers with which they began. U. G. had his, but they would never get theirs.

So why should they go on living? Naturally, no one bluntly posed this question to U. G. But they had his answer: There is no "you" that lives, only a body going about its business of being alive and obeying biology. Whenever someone asked U. G. how they could become like him, he always replied it would be impossible for them even to desire to become like him, because their motive for wanting to be like him was self-interested, and as long as they believed in a self that was interested in canceling itself, that self would want to keep itself alive and thus would not want to know ego-death. Whatever people did with their lives was of no concern to U. G., as he tirelessly recapitulated to those who engaged him in conversation. He did not see his himself as a sage with spiritual merchandise to sell. That was for the mountebanks of salvation

who infested the world with their codified sects, each baring its teeth to defend some trademarked trumpery.

U. G. is not the only known case of enlightenment by accident. A quite singular instance of the experience in question is that of the Australian physicist John Wren-Lewis, a non-religious man who nearly died of poisoning and woke up in a hospital in a state of enlightenment he never requested or pained himself to earn. Both U. G. and Wren-Lewis publicly emphasized the unsought nature of their illumination. Both also warned against gurus with recipes for enlightenment. In talks with interviewers, U. G., who did not write books, lambasted every religious figure known to humanity as a fraud. After his own awakening, Wren-Lewis became overtaken by the possible connection between enlightenment phenomena and NDEs. His way of thinking, for what it might be worth, parallels Zapffe's in that it identifies ordinary consciousness as a "basic malfunction" that "is some kind of inflation or hyperactivity of the psychological survival-system" ("Aftereffects of Near-Death Experience: A Survival Mechanism Hypothesis," *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology,* 1994). He derived hope that this malfunction could be repaired from the fact that NDE-ers are sometimes relieved from death anxiety by having their egoistic consciousness commuted into an "impersonal consciousness" of an enlightened sort. None of this is to say that reports of NDE experience are any more believable than, let us say, those of alien abductions. Leniently interpreted, however, they may foretell that our species has an outside chance at a future without extinction-fearing egos. Since the human race will never do the honorable thing and abort itself, perhaps someday we will be individually fixed to die without an unbecoming fight to the death.

A stereotypical report of an NDE is related by businessman and author Tem Horwitz in his essay "My Death: Reflections on My Journey into Non-Being" (*Death and Philosophy,* ed. Jeff Malpas and Robert C. Solomon, 1998). In the course of describing his transformation following his death as a result of anaphylactic shock in September 1995, Horwitz wrote:

"There was no vestige of self-importance left. It felt like death had obliterated my ego, the attachments I had, my history, and who I had been. Death had been very democratic. It had eliminated innumerable distinctions. With one bold stroke my past had been erased. I had no identity in death. It didn't stay erased—some would say that this was the real tragedy—but it was erased for a time. Gone was my personal history with all of its little vanities. The totality of myself was changed. The 'me' was much smaller and much more compact than it had been. All that there was, was right in front of me. I felt incredibly light. Personality was a vanity, an elaborate delusion, a ruse." Compared with U. G. Krishnamurti and John Wren-Lewis, Horwitz had only a slight case of ego-death following his clinical death. Soon afterward he was "cured" of the erasure of his identity.

Another statistic of long-term ego-death was Suzanne Segal, who one day found she had become bereft of herself. After years of seeking a cure to the unease this experience had set off in her—it would seem that not everybody is at peace with being nobody—she wrote *Collision with the Infinite: A Life Beyond the Personal Self* (1996). The following year she died of a brain tumor at the age of forty-two. Although no link was established between her diseased brain and the disappearance of her ego, cerebral tumors causing altered states of consciousness and changes in personality are not unknown.[5]

Unlike U. G. but similar to Wren-Lewis, Segal sought answers to her transformation in spiritual traditions that addressed egoless experience. Unlike Wren-Lewis but similar to U. G., Segal had pursued a spiritual practice, Transcendental Meditation, before she became the beneficiary of enlightenment by accident. Segal lost her ego two years after discontinuing TM, which she performed for eight years. In an interview, she stated that she did not feel meditation played a role in the loss of her self-identity. U. G. was in agreement with Segal. After years of pursuing ego-death through meditation, he railed against this procedure as pointless and perhaps harmful.

For most of humanity, including that part which studies consciousness, the phenomenon of ego-death is not enthralling, or even well marked as a human experience. Ordinary folk have all their big questions answered to their satisfaction by some big book. And cognitive psychologists, philosophers of mind, and neuroscientists have their reputations to consider as high priests of the noosphere. Quite naturally, then, almost no one figures their time to be ill-spent in bickering about some point of scripture or a psycho-philosophical poser rather than in sizing up some superlative individuals who have called into question what we are or what we might be aside from slaves of our egos.

Regardless of the life stories of U. G., Wren-Lewis, and Suzanne Segal, ego-death is a state that has nothing but anecdotal evidence to support it, which groups this phenomenon with mystical experiences and revealed religions. As one might imagine, though, ego-death is laden with about as much mass appeal as physical death. It has been eyeballed as an ideal only by a miniscule number of our species who feel there is something wrong with ego-life, which they conceive as an uncanny masquerade where things they would rather not see are behind every false face. To everyone else, life is life and death is death. We are not sold on impersonal survival. It would negate all that we are, or think we are, for what are we but egos itching to survive? And once our egos have been deposed, what would be left of us? By all recorded accounts, everything would be left except what Horwitz called "a vanity, an elaborate delusion, a ruse."

Some would say that if human beings must exist, the condition in which U. G., Wren-Lewis, and Segal found themselves is the optimum model, one in which everyone's ego has been overthrown and our consciousness of ourselves as persons goes up in smoke. As Segal tried to explain what had happened to her:

> The experience of living without a personal identity, without an experience of being somebody, an "I" or a "me," is exceedingly difficult to describe, but it is absolutely unmistakable. It can't be confused with having a bad day or coming down with the flu or feeling upset or angry or spaced out. When the personal self disappears, there is no one inside who can be located as being

> you. The body is only an outline, empty of everything of which it had previously felt so full.
>
> The mind, body, and emotions no longer referred to anyone—there was no one who thought, no one who felt, no one who perceived. Yet the mind, body, and emotions continued to function unimpaired; apparently they did not need an "I" to keep doing what they always did. Thinking, feeling, perceiving, speaking, all continued as before, functioning with a smoothness that gave no indication of the emptiness behind them. No one suspected that such a radical change had occurred. All conversations were carried on as before; language was employed in the same manner. Questions could be asked and answered, cars driven, meals cooked, books read, phones answered, and letters written. (*Collision with the Infinite*)

As the ego-dead, so we might imagine, we would continue to know pain in its various forms—that is the essence of existence—but we would not be cozened by our egos to take it personally, an attitude that converts an individual's pain into conscious suffering. Naturally, we would still have to feed, but we would not be omnivorous gourmands who eat for amusement, gorging down everything in nature and turning to the laboratory for more. As for reproduction, who can say? Animals are driven to copulate, and even as the ego-dead we would not be severed from biology, although we would not be unintelligently ruled by it, as we are now. As a corollary of not being unintelligently ruled by biology, neither would we sulk over our extinction, as we do now. Why raise another generation destined to climb aboard the evolutionary treadmill? But then, why not raise another generation of the ego-dead? For those who do not perceive either their pleasures or their pains as belonging to them, neither life nor death would be objectionable or not objectionable, desirable or not desirable, all right or not all right. We would be the ego-dead, the self-less, and, dare we say, the enlightened.

A depiction of what our lives might be like in such a state would seem to have been recorded in the eightieth section of the *Tao Te Ching,* perhaps to show up humankind's modus vivendi by daydreaming about one not of this earth.

> Let all lands be small
> and their people few,
> so they have no need
> for time-saving machines.

Let them keep their minds
On the coming of death
And never stray far
From where they were born.

Should they have boats
Or carts to go traveling,
Let there be nothing
They would want to see.

Should they have weapons,
Let them be put someplace
Out of everyone's sight
To rust and grow useless.

Let each person's duties
Be no more than may be
Kept track of by tying knots
On a short piece of string.

Let their food be enough
And their clothes drab,
Their homes decent shelter
And their lives unremarkable.

If the next land is so close
That they can hear its
Dogs barking at night and its
Roosters crowing at dawn …

Let them get old and die
Rather than be troubled
By the least curiosity
To have a look over there.

One might think of this not as a description of an ego-dead society but of one that is dead all the way. But one would be wrong. Wherever there are those who "get old and die," there are also those who live in wait for age and for death—youths

and infants and infants-to-be. And although none of them takes his fate personally, why should any of them take it at all? Of course, this would not occur to the ego-dead, just as it does not occur to species of a lower order that recycle themselves as nature bids them. The ego-dead would be back to where our race began—surviving, reproducing, dying. Nature's way would be restored in all its mindlessness and puppetry.

But even if ego-death is regarded as the optimum model for human existence, one of liberation from ourselves, it still remains a compromise with being, a concession to the blunder of creation itself. We should be able to do better, and we can. To have our egos killed off is second-best to killing off death and all the squalid byplay that flitters around it. So let all lands be small, and grower smaller and smaller until no lands are left where any human footstep need press itself upon the earth.

At the height of her ego-death, Segal was ecstatic twenty-four hours a day. She also began to speak of what she called the "vastness," a term that sounds as if it belongs in one of Lovecraft's tales of cosmic horror. To Segal, the vastness was a unitary phenomenon that comprised all existence. As she wrote, "The purpose of human life has been revealed. The vastness created these human circuitries in order to have an experience of itself out of itself that it couldn't have without them." Living in the vastness as she did, nothing was useless to Segal because it served the purposes of the vastness. For her, it also felt good once she had gotten over her initial fear of being a tool of the vastness rather than a person. However, toward the end of her life, as American psychotherapist and Buddhist Stephan Bodian recounts in his afterword to *Collision with the Infinite,* Segal began to have more intense experiences in which "the vastness became even vaster for itself." This new phase of the vastness both distressed her emotionally and sapped her physical energy until she died from her unsuspected brain tumor not long afterward.

Like Segal's vastness, Schopenhauer's Will has the same purpose in mind for human beings—to use our "circuitries" to acquire some kind of knowledge of its mindless self. For Schopenhauer, though, the self-seeking Will does not feel good to human beings except during moments when we temporarily satisfy its universal ravening as it emerges within us. Why the vastness or the Will should want to use us in this way is a mystery. Both of these non-dualistic meta-realities do serve the purpose of making sense of human life in their own way. But whether they make us feel good does not seem to matter to either of them. We are just vehicles; they are the drivers. And wherever we are going, as Segal and Schopenhauer have assured us, along with every other individual whose consciousness has been opened to the vastness by whatever name or nature, we must keep in mind that we are not what we think we are. Taking things a step further, Professor Nobody would teach us that neither is our world what we think it is, lecturing us with a flamboyant dispassion on the omnipresence of the *infernal* in "The Eyes That Never Blink."

> Mist on a lake, fog in thick woods, a golden light shining on wet stones—such sights make it all very easy. Something lives in the lake, rustles through the woods, inhabits the stones or the earth beneath them. Whatever it may be, this *something* lies just out of sight, but not out of vision for the eyes that never blink. In the right surroundings our entire being is made of eyes that dilate to witness the haunting of the universe. But really, do the right surroundings have to be so obvious in their spectral atmosphere?
>
> Take a cramped waiting room, for instance. Everything there seems so well-anchored in normalcy. Others around you talk ever so quietly; the old clock on the wall is sweeping aside the seconds with its thin red finger; the window blinds deliver slices of light from the outside world and shuffle them with shadows. Yet at any time and in any place, our bunkers of banality may begin to rumble. You see, even in a stronghold of our fellow beings we may be subject to abnormal fears that would land us in an asylum if we voiced them to another. Did we just feel some presence that does not belong among us? Do our eyes see something in a corner of that room in which we wait for we know not what?
>
> Just a little doubt slipped into the mind, a little trickle of suspicion in the bloodstream, and all those eyes of ours, one by one, open up to the world and see its horror. Then: no belief or body of laws will guard you; no friend, no counselor, no appointed personage will save you; no locked door will protect you; no private office will hide you. Not even the solar brilliance of a sum-

mer day will harbor you from horror. For horror eats the light and digests it into darkness.

Sick to Death

Bleakness I

To salve the pains of consciousness, some people anesthetize themselves with sunny thoughts. But not everyone can follow their lead, above all not those who sneer at the sun and everything upon which it beats down. Their only respite is in the balm of bleakness. Disdainful of the solicitations of hope, they look for sanctuary in desolate places—a scattering of ruins in a barren locale or a rubble of words in a book where someone whispers in a dry voice, "I, too, am here." However, downcast readers must be on their guard. Phony retreats have lured many who treasure philosophical and literary works of a pessimistic, nihilistic, or defeatist nature as indispensable to their existence. Too often they have settled into a book that begins as an oration on bleak experience but wraps up with the author slipping out the back door and making his way down a shining path, leaving downcast readers more rankled than they were before entering what turned out to be only a façade of ruins, a *trompe l'oeil* of bleakness. *A Confession* (1882) by Leo Tolstoy is the archetype of such a book.

Having basked in his status as the author of *War and Peace* (1865–69) and *Anna Karenina* (1875–77), not to forget his station as a wealthy landowner, Tolstoy was ripe for a devastating reversal of some kind. This came in the form of a crisis of consciousness during which he became mightily disenchanted with human life. Naturally, he began casting about for something to ease his discomfiture. After turning to science for answers to the big questions that had lately begun to eat at him, he came up with this: "In general, the relation of the experimental sciences to life's questions may be expressed thus: Question: 'Why do I live?' Answer: 'In infinite space, in infinite time, infinitely small particles change their forms in infinite complexity, and when you have understood the laws of those mutations of form you will understand why you live on the earth.'"

Those inclined to query the various sciences will forever come upon the same answer. It is a useless answer to a useless question. But Tolstoy did not think the question useless, only the answer, so he kept on digging until he read Schopenhauer, who only exasperated the Russian's crisis by answering, "Life is that which should not be—an evil; and the passage into Nothingness is the only good in life." Tolstoy was impressed with Schopenhauer as a thinker and tried to hold the plow steady as he made his way through the philosopher's daunting works.

At length, Tolstoy narrowed down the options that people like himself had available to them depending on whether they wanted to keep believing that being alive was all right or were ready to consider the alternative. (Please pardon the length of this quotation, but Tolstoy's four principal strategies by which his high-class circle managed the predicament of conscious existence deserve as much of a hearing as Zapffe's four principal strategies by which everyone manages the same predicament.)

> I found that for people of my circle there were four ways out of the terrible position in which we are all placed.
>
> The first was that of ignorance. It consists in not knowing, not understanding, that life is an evil and an absurdity. People of this sort … have not yet understood that question of life…. They see neither the dragon that awaits them nor the mice gnawing the shrub by which they are hanging, and they lick the drops of honey. But they lick those drops of honey only for a while: Something will turn their attention to the dragon and the mice, and there will be an end to their licking. From them I had nothing to learn—one cannot cease to know what one does know.
>
> The second way out is Epicureanism. It consists, while knowing the hopelessness of life, in making use meanwhile of the advantages one has, disregarding the dragon and the mice, and licking the honey in the best way, especially if there is much of it within reach. Solomon expresses this way out thus: "Then I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry: and that this should accompany him in his labor the days of his life, which God giveth him under the sun. Therefore eat thy bread with joy and drink thy wine with a merry heart…. Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity … for this is thy portion in life and in thy labors which thou takest under the sun…. Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might, for there is not work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest."
>
> That is the way in which the majority of people of our circle make life possible for themselves. Their circumstances furnish them with more of wel-

fare than of hardship, and their moral dullness makes it possible for them to forget that the advantage of their position is accidental, and that not everyone can have a thousand wives and palaces like Solomon, that for everyone who has a thousand wives there are a thousand without a wife, and that for each palace there are a thousand people who have to build it in the sweat of their brows; and that the accident that has today made me a Solomon may tomorrow make me a Solomon's slave. The dullness of these people's imagination enables them to forget the things that gave Buddha no peace—the inevitability of sickness, old age, and death, which today or tomorrow will destroy all these pleasures.

So think and feel the majority of people of our day and our manner of life. The fact that some of these people declare the dullness of their thoughts and imaginations to be a philosophy, which they call Positive, does not remove them, in my opinion, from the ranks of those who, to avoid seeing the question, lick the honey. I could not imitate these people; not having their dullness of imagination I could not artificially produce it in myself. I could not tear my eyes from the mice and the dragon, as no vital man can after he has once seen them.

The third escape is that of strength and energy. It consists in destroying life, when one has understood that it is an evil and an absurdity. A few exceptionally strong and consistent people act so. Having understood the stupidity of the joke that has been played on them, and having understood that it is better to be dead than to be alive, and that it is best of all not to exist, they act accordingly and promptly end this stupid joke, since there are means: a rope round one's neck, water, a knife to stick into one's heart, or the trains on the railways; and the number of those of our circle who act in this way becomes greater and greater, and for the most part they act so at the best time of their life, when the strength of their mind is in full bloom and few habits degrading to the mind have as yet been acquired.

I saw that this was the worthiest way of escape and I wished to adopt it.

The fourth way out is that of weakness. It consists in seeing the truth of the situation and yet clinging to life, knowing in advance that nothing can come of it. People of this kind know that death is better than life, but not having the strength to act rationally—to end the deception quickly and kill themselves—they seem to wait for something. This is the escape of weakness, for if I know what is best and it is within my power, why not yield to what is best? … I found myself in that category.

So people of my class evade the terrible contradiction in four ways. Strain my attention as I would, I saw no way except those four….[1] (Trans. Aylmer Maude)

Earlier in his life, Tolstoy had fought intrepidly in the Crimean War, and in *War and Peace* he used this experience for his rendition of Russian life during the reign of Napoleon. Courageous in battle, the literary master also flourished his fortitude in writing the words in the above quotation. Few men of such wealth and accomplishment have had the mettle to express sentiments of this nature within earshot of their

peers and the general public. Naturally, Tolstoy expressed these sentiments only after he had moved to safer ground, which turned his "confession" into a handbook for survival, a trip guide with directions for skating around the pitfalls of consciousness that Zapffe would later outline in "The Last Messiah."

Tolstoy's salvation came about when he hit upon a way to disown coherence and sidle up to religion, even though it was not religion of the common sort and led to his excommunication from the Russian Orthodox Church. A titan of conceptual prestidigitation, he had rationalized his way into irrationality. Spending time with his serfs helped him to befuddle his consciousness. Like them—more nicely, like his perception of them—he began living not by his brain but by his "gut." Then he started reasoning with his gut, which showed him the way to recovery and spared him the ordeal of becoming a suicide. Later, though, his mind went to work again, and he was once more in crisis. He remained preoccupied with life and death and meaning for the rest of his days and as an author preached a brand of positive thought—as in the bathetic "Death of Ivan Ilyich" (1886)—in an ongoing crusade against the bleakness that dogged him.

Bleakness II

Having been betrayed by such works as Tolstoy's *Confession,* connoisseurs of bleakness may become shrewd readers. If they are mistrustful of a book, leery that the promise of its inaugural pages will be broken by its conclusion, they turn first to the ending. Many books promoted as vehicles of a "dark vision" finish up by lounging in a warm bath of affirmation, often doing a traitorous turnabout in their closing pages or paragraphs.[2] As every author, publisher, and carnival owner knows, lurid billing gets a patron in the door. And so we have innumerable books and magazine articles with such inquiring titles as *The Misadventure of Consciousness: Are Human Beings a Mistake of Evolution?* or "Should We Stop Having Children?" The answer is always "No," sometimes resounding in its declamation but more often qualified, which is even more

vile. Searchers after bleakness would do well, then, to begin at the ending of books and magazine articles with doomful titles or angst-fraught openings if they are not to be chiseled by a bait-and-switch maneuver.

One of the finest curtain closers in fiction is that of Horace McCoy's short novel *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* The protagonist of this story is a young woman named Gloria Beatty. Hoping to walk away with a sum of much-needed cash, and for lack of anything better to do, Gloria becomes an entrant in a grueling dance marathon during the Great Depression of the 1930s. A disconsolate loser from the start of the book, she begins the dance with an insight not habitually stressed in popular fiction. "It's peculiar to me," Gloria says to her partner in the marathon, "that everybody pays so much attention to living and so little to dying. Why are these high-powered scientists always screwing around trying to prolong life instead of finding pleasant ways to end it? There must be a hell of a lot of people in the world like me—who want to die but haven't got the guts."

After the dance marathon has taken its toll on Gloria and the other contestants, her once happy-go-lucky partner goes over to her side, and with more nobility than any high-powered scientist and more mercy than any god born of human imagination, he helps her to end it all. This liberation is effectuated in one of the most common and untidy ways the suicidal have been forced to use for so long—a bullet to the brain. The ending of McCoy's novel is what the average mortal would call bleak. Naturally, bleak-minded readers of *They Shoot Horses* swoon with relief when the gunshot has done its work. Yet even the consolations of bleakness have their limits for those who treasure philosophical and literary works of a pessimistic, nihilistic, or defeatist nature as indispensable to their existence. And should bleakness itself fail them, they have been failed indeed.

Pro-Life

They Shoot Horses, Don't They? was first published in 1935. Since that time, scientists have continued screwing around to draw out our days of pain and have done almost nothing on the other front. It is as if they have taken Victor Frankenstein as a role model and emulate him as they can. In his 1994 bestseller *How We Die: Reflections on Life's Final Chapter,* surgeon Sherwin B. Nuland recounts how he coaxed a ninety-two-year-old woman into having an operation that would wring from her a few more months or years of life. While she initially declined, content to die at what was already an advanced age, Dr. Nuland wore her down and got her into the operating room, figuring, as he states, that his patient was "one of those people to whom survival was not worth the cost." He admits that he withheld from her the exact nature of that cost as it would be extracted in the form of postoperative agonies should she survive the surgery. She did survive long enough to suffer those agonies and to let Nuland know what a villain she considered him to be.

Subsequent to some perfunctory hand-wrenching about his dishonorable ministration, the doctor tries to vindicate himself by confiding that, had he not performed this operation, he would be chastised by his peer group at the hospital's weekly surgical conference for not following standard operating procedure. Nuland's fellow surgeons, so he informs us, would have viewed his compliance with a patient's request to let her body die without further tampering as an ethical call. But that was not his call to make. He was not a moral philosopher. He was a technician entrusted to keep bodies beating with life. All his decisions, then, must comply with this trust or he would have to answer for why they did not. And to answer that his patient chose not to go under the knife would be unacceptable, since doctors should be the only ones to decide such things.[3]

In their actions, Nuland and his colleagues played out a mainstay of the horror genre: that of an experiment gone wrong. This convention became proverbial following the publication in 1818 of a novel that immortalized Mary Shelley. It is as if

Nuland and his fellow mad doctors took the botched surgery in that book as their guiding light. "What protocol would Frankenstein follow?" they might have asked themselves. He was their mentor—the one for whom Life was the greatest show on earth. To boot, Nuland had already sized up the old woman as "one of those people."

Not as philosophically ahead of her years as McCoy's Gloria in *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?,* Nuland's patient did know when the time had come for her to bow out gracefully. She thought she might be allotted that much control over her life. What she did not know was that she was strapped down in Frankenstein's world, and by damn she would live and die by Frankenstein's Oath: "We, as licensed protectors of the species and members in good standing of the master-class of the race, by the power invested in us by those who wish to survive and reproduce, vow to enforce the fiction that life is worth having and worth living come hell or irreparable brain damage." How could an old woman who had been stigmatized as "one of those people" go up against such a juggernaut of chicanery?

Eventually euthanasia will be an elective procedure for the terminally ill, and perhaps for anyone who so chooses this sure cure. At this stage of social progress, however, those who reject Frankenstein and affirm McCoy's Gloria must take care of themselves … if they can work up the guts or get a little help. But standing in the way of their making the right move are some formidable obstacles. One of them is the conscience (archaic for "consciousness") that Shakespeare's Hamlet avowed "makes cowards of us all." Another is the peer pressure that Dr. Nuland felt might squeeze him out of a job. There may also be a crew of friends and relatives whose lives are interwoven with those of suicides and who die with them though they live on after the "crime" of voluntary death has been committed.

If nature made a blunder by retching up creatures in which consciousness grew like a fungus, she still knew enough to implant in them an instinct that serves the species and spurs

on its members to chew off a leg to escape capture and killing, whose dominant drives are survival and the spreading of themselves far and wide. Should any philosopher ever establish that life is not worth having and not worth living, the average mortal, as well as the average surgeon, would somehow preserve the fiction of its value, however meager that might be.

Thanatophobia

A philosophical bromide of the post-nihilistic era asserts that being alive has no value except within a limited framework. In the history of cinema, a well-worn storyline is that of a law-enforcement official who moves from a big city to a small town because in the big city his efforts to better his environment were ineffective or unnoticeable while those in a small town, he expects, will "make a difference." The plan here is to change frameworks in hopes of creating the illusion that one's life has value in itself. It is an atheistic plan, if not overtly so. Theists do not need limited frameworks to snatch some meaning for their lives because they believe they have an absolute framework in a Higher Power, even though they really do not. The veritable exclusion of a deity from both high and low cultural products testifies that theism is a rather weak framework of meaning for the majority of mortals, or at least for those who consume high and low cultural products. If this were not so, then movies and other types of entertainment in which meaning is found within the frameworks of romantic love, action in the world, and so on would be unnecessary, as they prove to be among certain Amish and Mennonite sects.

Outside of the movies, the plan of exchanging one framework for another is more difficult to pull off. And since these frameworks are made up by our minds, and not by a filmmaker, they may break up at any moment. Although one may believe in an ultimate frame in which our lives are lived out, the persistence of this belief is uncertain and not reliably consolatory. Faith in some absolute—or, alternatively, faith in some non-theistic framework of meaning—may go limp

without advance notice. Once the frame falls in upon itself, we must fall back on our own resources and seek out another frame. None of these frames is constant in preserving our comfort of mind and assisting us in making sense out of our lives. Moving from frame to frame may afford us some comfort and sense for a good while, yet there still remains that final frame from which we will never break loose because it is a holding place waiting to be filled by pain and then, in some form, by death. This is not a frame one wants to explore for very long. All things considered, the happiest epitaph to have etched on one's headstone is this: "He never knew what hit him." On second thought, though, would dying without so much as a heads- up and in the blink of an eye really be the best way for us to go?

In his "Letter on Happiness" addressed to Menoeceus, Epicurus wrote: "Foolish … is the man who says that he fears death, not because it will pain when it comes, but because it pains in the prospect." This statement seems to affirm that there is nothing foolish about fearing the pain of death "when it comes." But when Epicurus himself was dying, he wrote a note to his friend Idomeneus, "On this blissful day, which is also the last of my life, I write this to you. My continual sufferings from strangury [due to kidney stones] and dysentery are so great that nothing could increase them; but I set above them all the gladness of mind at the memory of our past conversations." So Epicurus had all a mortal could want: to be fearless of dying, to be happy while dying, and to be unafraid of death.

Unflustered as he was by the process of dying, the founder of Epicureanism offered no logic for why others should not be terrorized by it. His only logical formula was for the relieving oneself of the fear of death: "Whatever causes no annoyance when it is present, causes only a groundless pain in the expectation. Death, therefore, the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not." Some persons may believe in Epicurus's logic and by it not suffer the "groundless pain in

the expectation" of death. But how many can say the same about death's pain before it comes or "when it comes"? This question brings us back to our second thoughts on what would be the happiest epitaph to have etched on one's headstone.

Suppose that the pain of dying were taken out of our lives? Suppose that we all died without so much as a heads-up and in the blink of an eye, because if our deaths did not happen in this manner then dying would necessarily be painful. How else would you know you were dying without the presence of pain, the fear of which even Epicurus did not think was foolish? One second we are alive, and the next we are dead. Then all of us could never know what hit us, a gift that is now reserved only for a happy few. Ideally democratic, this system of mortality would equalize our ruination as one by one, or thousands in a stroke, we departed from this life without so much as a heads-up and in the blink of an eye. Every time we sat down in a chair, we could not be sure we would rise again before the reaper impalpably took our hand. We could bypass every pain that would lead to our death, which is not to say we would bypass pains that would not lead to our death. Being in pain would then mean that one was not dying. Everything would be as it is now except that we would succumb without so much as a heads-up and in the blink of an eye. We would never have to think about How we would die, only When. And when the When came, we would not even know we had died. Each breath could be our last. Under such an arrangement, we would either have to become Epicureans and not fear death or, more likely, we would divert from our consciousness the thought that we could die without so much as a heads-up and in the blink of an eye. The latter is more likely because this is our present approach to the inevitability of our death, only we would never have to fear the all but inevitable pain of dying. Some morbid citizens among us might become cataleptic with anxiety because their next breath may be their last, but most of us would not be wrecked by such unremitting worry. As a further bonus, we would have no grisly images about the How, since the How would be

the same for all. So even on second thought, the happiest epitaph to have etched on one's headstone would be: "He never knew what hit him." We would still have to live our lives in shaky frameworks, but death would be nothing to us because dying would be nothing to us, or most of us, since some of us might be cataleptic with the morbid fear that our next breath may be our last. But at least most of us would have it all, as did Epicurus, and would not be the least bit pained about dying, as the Greek philosopher was not. Who among us would be so unrepentantly wayward as to want a painful heads-up that we are dying or to die in anything more than the blink of an eye? And only our most morbid citizens would feel anxious about death.

Be that as it may, there is a school of psychology that has us all figured as morbid citizens. Known as Terror Management Theory (TMT), its principles were inspired by the writings of the Canadian cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker, who was one with Zapffe in wondering why a "damning surplus of consciousness" had not caused humanity to go "extinct during great epidemics of madness." In his best-known work, *The Denial of Death* (1973), Becker wrote: "I believe that those who speculate that a full apprehension of man's condition would drive him insane are right, quite literally right." Zapffe concluded that we kept our heads by "artificially limiting the content of consciousness." Becker stated his identical conclusion as follows: "[Man] literally drives himself into a blind obliviousness with social games, psychological tricks, personal preoccupations so far removed from the reality of his situation that they are forms of madness, but madness all the same." Outlawed truisms. Taboo commonplaces.

Synthesizing and expanding Becker's core ideas, three psychology professors—Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski—presented the concepts of TMT to the psychological community in the mid-1980s. In its clinical studies and research, TMT indicates that the mainspring of human behavior is thanatophobia, and that this fear determines the entire landscape of our lives. To subdue our death

anxiety, we have trumped up a world to deceive ourselves into believing that we will persist—if only symbolically—beyond the breakdown of our bodies. We know this fabricated world because we see it around us every day, and to perpetuate our sanity we apotheosize it as the best world in the world. Housing the most cyclopean fabrications are houses of worship where some people go to get a whiff of meaning, which to such people means only one thing—immortality. In heaven or hell or reincarnated life forms, we must go on and on—*us* without end. Travesties of immortalism are effected day and night in obstetrics wards, factories of our future that turn out a product made in its makers' image, a miracle granted by entering into a devil's bargain with God, who is glorified with all the credit for giving us a chance to have our names and genetics projected into a time we will not live to see.[4]

However, as TMT analyzes this scheme, getting the better of our death anxiety is not as simple as it might appear. If we are to be at peace with our mortality, we need to know that what we leave behind us when we die will survive just as we left it. Those churches cannot be just any churches—they must be *our* churches, whoever we may be. The same holds true of progeny and its stand-ins. In lieu of personal immortality, we are willing to accept the survival of persons and institutions that we regard as extensions of us—*our* families, *our* heroes, *our* religions, *our* countries.[5] And anyone who presents a threat to our continuance as a branded society of selves, anyone who does not look and live as we do, should think twice before treading on our turf, because from here to eternity it is every self for itself and all its facsimiles. In such a world, one might extrapolate that the only honest persons—from the angle of self-delusion, naturally—are those who brazenly implement genocide against outsiders who impinge upon them and *their* world. With that riff-raff out of the way, there will be more room on earth and in eternity for the right sort of people and their fabrications.

That said, promulgators of TMT believe that a universal dispersion of their ideas will make people more tolerant of the

alien worldviews of others and not kill them because those worldviews remind them of how ephemeral or unfounded their own may be. The paradox of this belief is that it requires everyone to abandon the very techniques of terror management by which TMT claims we so far have managed our terror, or some of it. As usual, though, there is an upbeat way out for terror management theorists in that they argue "that the best worldviews are ones that value tolerance of different others, that are flexible and open to modifications, and that offer paths to self-esteem minimally likely to encourage hurting others" (*Handbook of Experimental Existential Psychology,* ed. Jeff Greenberg et al.). Of course, this is just another worldview that brandishes itself as the best worldview in the world, meaning that it would agitate others with a sense of how ephemeral or unfounded their own may be and cause them to retaliate. But terror management theorists also have a back-up plan, which is that in the future we will not need terror management and instead will discover that "serious confrontations with mortality can have positive, liberating effects, facilitating real growth and life satisfaction." There is no arguing that humanity may someday reap the benefits of a serious confrontation with mortality. While waiting for that day, we still have genocide as the ultimate insurance of our worldviews.

In categorical opposition to genocide on an as-needed basis are such individuals as Gloria Beatty. Without making too much of a mess, they quietly shut the door on a single life, caring not that they leave behind people who are not like them. Most of these antisocial types are only following the logic of pain to its conclusion. Some plan their last bow to serve the double duty of both delivering them from life and avenging themselves for some wrong, real or imagined, against them. Also worthy of mention is a clique among the suicidal for whom the meaning of their act is a darker thing. Frustrated as perpetrators of an all-inclusive extermination, they would kill themselves only because killing it all is closed off to them. They hate having been delivered into a world only to be told, by and by, "This way to the abattoir, Ladies and Gen-

tlemen." They despise the conspiracy of Lies for Life almost as much as they despise themselves for being a party to it. If they could unmake the world by pushing a button, they would do so without a second thought. There is no satisfaction in a lonesome suicide. The phenomenon of "suicide euphoria" aside, there is only fear, bitterness, or depression beforehand, then the troublesomeness of the method, and nothingness afterward. But to push that button, to depopulate this earth and arrest its rotation as well—what satisfaction, as of a job prettily done. This would be for the good of all, for even those who know nothing about the conspiracy against the human race are among its injured parties.[6]

Tragedy

As we are all well aware, people often have seriously discrepant interests and desires. If this were not so, we would all be getting along with one another, which has never been and never will be the rule. Nothing in our history or our nature even hints that we will ever liquidate our differences, which can be anything from a good-natured divergence of opinion to a war-making contentiousness over property rights. Some people would like to have a little peace rather than the ever-sounding disharmony of bloodletting. But for that to happen, our myriad voices would have to dissolve into a single pitch—a unison that would bore to tears anyone who is not a saint or ego-dead.

Our common preference as a species is for difference rather than unity. (*Vive la différence. Vive la guerre.*) Nobody designed us to be this way—it just happens to be how we blundered into the nightmare of being. Life preys on life, per Schopenhauer and natural history. One organism's body is another organism's meal. As the title character of Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* (1979) sings to his partner in manslaughter, one Mrs. Lovett: "For what's the sound of the world out there? It's man devouring man, my dear." To claim otherwise is a lie. Differences make all the difference to us. What we want is variety in our lives—a multitude of distractions to keep consciousness in its cage. What we want is the unheard-

of, the nothing-like. And there is nothing like the screech of Sweeney's blade that we hear at the opening to Sondheim's musical tragedy about the Demon Barber of Fleet Street.

To entertain ourselves for a spell, let us proclaim that were it not for tragedy the human race would have gone extinct long ago. It keeps us on our toes and pushes us toward the future in a paradoxical search to purge the tragic from our lives. As the wise puppet said, "Better we should be inundated by tragedy than to have nothing meaningful to work toward." No one knows this better than the entertainers among us, those sublimating masters of artifice who could not forge their "great works" without the screams and sobs arising out of the pit where tremulous shadows run from themselves.

As decreed by its author, each action and consequence in *Sweeney Todd* flows out of and feeds into the tragic, artificially speaking. It is the pedal tone over which all other propellants of the drama—for instance, beauty and love—serve as passing grace notes that seem to suggest something other than the tragic, yet are actually as much a part of the piece as the unhomely horrors that stalk the stage. While Sondheim's musical inspires the pity and fear that Aristotle believed should be affects of tragic drama, no Aristotelian purgation of emotion or catharsis is infused in us at the end. From the opening to the finale of Sondheim's tragedy there is only a perpetual agon among casualties of the human condition.

So Sweeney begins his tragic tale: "There was a barber and his wife." In the style of many a horror that has wormed its way from the muck of organic existence, *Sweeney Todd* has as its back-story a happy marriage and the propagation of a new life, in this case that of the child Johanna. ("Wake up, Johanna, it's another bright red day," sings Pater Todd.) And new life only rehashes old life in its pain when one offspring meets another. "I feel you, Johanna / I'll steal you, Johanna," croons Anthony to his beloved, who together compose a romantic pairing for the purpose of casting a ray of false hope into the sooty stage set of the drama.

However, to anyone who has not fallen asleep during the performance, this new Adam and Eve are only being readied

for the meat grinder of existence, just as were a barber named Benjamin Barker and his wife Lucy, all because Judge Turpin lusted after Benjamin's spouse and got him out of the way by unjustly sentencing the haircutter to a long prison term in Australia. Deranged by her rape at a soirée presided over by the judge, Lucy kills herself, or tries to, by drinking poison, leaving her infant daughter in the hands of the dirty old jurist, who raises her as his ward and, despite his best efforts, drools to have her in his bed following a May-December marriage. When Benjamin returns after his escape from prison some decades later, all he wants is to be reunited with his wife and child. Alas, this is not to be, which is how Sweeney Todd, mad to avenge the wrongs against him and his wife, not to mention the abduction of his child, comes to be born. In league with Mrs. Lovett, an unscrupulous maker of meat pies, the tragedy begins in earnest as Sweeney begins slicing throats and his consort grinds his victims into tasty edibles to be sold at her shop.

As husband and wife raising a girl-child, Benjamin and Lucy would have been galloping bores. It is only when they have been driven in chains through the inferno of their lives that they are fit to slake our thirst for tragedy, motivator of both the masses and above-average mortals. They are positioned within the innermost circle of hell, while Mrs. Lovett, Judge Turpin, Tobias Ragg, and others radiate concentrically about them with their own fateful cravings (for beauty, love, and such like), edging them ever closer to the barber's blade and the fire-belching oven.

Ready or not, we all end up as filling for one of Mrs. Lovett's meat pies. In the reported last words of Thomas Lovell Beddoes, the Romantic poet called himself "food for what I am good for—worms." Even though worms do not dine on many of us in modernized nations, the point still resonates that our lives are fundamentally inglorious. It is as a counterweight to the blithering fatuousness of human life that *tragedy as entertainment* performs a crucial function—that of coating the spattered nothingness of our lives with a veneer of grandeur and style, qualities of the theatrical world and not the every-

day one. This is why we are thrilled with the horror of Sweeney Todd and envy the qualities that he possesses and we lack. He is as edifying as any sage when he sings "We all deserve to die," given that none of us can unmake our making. He has a sense of mission that few who are made of flesh and blood rather than of music and poetry will ever know ("But the work waits / I'm alive at last / And I'm full of joy"). Most of all, he has the courage and bravado to do that which he knows needs to be done. "To seek revenge may lead to hell," he cautions, to which Mrs. Lovett answers, "But everyone does it and seldom as well … as Sweeney."

Nature is limited to Grand Guignol, spectacles of bloodlust and fests of slaughter. But we humans can reach for things more heady than the corpse. After murder and cannibalism have been played out in *Sweeney Todd,* the dead rise up for an encore, one of many they will make in a world where nature is not in charge—a world that spins in the supernatural, our world. Collectively, we are the undead, and for us the work will always be waiting, the devouring will never be done until someone or something performs the service of killing our rat race or we kill off ourselves. As in the beginning, so at the end, the dangling puppets sing: "Attend the tale of Sweeney Todd," a story that makes for a wonderfully tragic evening at the theater.

Whatever else we may be as creatures that go to and fro on the earth and walk up and down upon it, we are meat. A cannibalistic tribe that once flourished had a word to describe what they ate. That word translates as "the food that talks." Most of the food that we have eaten over the course of human history has not talked. But it does make other noises, terrible sounds as it makes the transition from living meat to dead meat on the slaughterhouse floor. If we could hear these sounds every time we sat down to a hearty meal, would we still be the wanton gobblers of flesh that most of us are now? This is hard to say. But as Farmer Vincent (Rory Calhoun) says in the movie *Motel Hell* (1980): "Meat's meat and a man's

gotta eat." And it takes all kinds of critters to make Farmer Vincent's fritters.

Beef, pork, sometimes goat—they go into us and come out of us. This is part of the regimen of nonsense that nature forced upon us. But it is not all the nonsense we must endure as we go to and fro on the earth and walk up and down upon it. The nature nonsense, the God nonsense. How much nonsense can we take in our lives? And is there any way we can escape it? No, there is not. We are doomed to all kinds of nonsense: the pain nonsense, the nightmare nonsense, the sweat and slave nonsense, and many other shapes and sizes of insufferable nonsense. It is brought to us on a plate, and we must eat it up or face the death nonsense.[7]

But perhaps by lustfully consuming the worst nonsense of our lives, including the death nonsense, we may eat our way out of our all-consuming tragedy as a conscious species. Professor Nobody has something to say about this tactic in his lecture "Sardonic Harmony." Here he builds to a tone of undisguised acrimony unusual for the coolly didactic, self-styled savant. But that is no reason we should not listen to his nonsense once more.

> Compassion for human hurt, a humble sense of our impermanence, an absolute valuation of justice—all our so-called virtues only trouble us and serve to bolster, not assuage, horror. In addition, these qualities are our least vital, the least in line with life. More often than not, they stand in the way of one's rise in the welter of this world, which found its pace long ago and has not deviated from it since. The putative affirmations of life—each of them based on the propaganda of Tomorrow: reproduction, revolution in its widest sense, piety in any form you can name—are only affirmations of our desires. And, in fact, these affirmations affirm nothing but our propensity for self-torment, our mania to preserve a demented innocence in the face of gruesome facts.
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> By means of supernatural horror we may evade, if momentarily, the horrific reprisals of affirmation. Every one of us, having been stolen from nonexistence, opens his eyes on the world and looks down the road at a few convulsions and a final obliteration. What a weird scenario. So why affirm anything, why make a pathetic virtue of a terrible necessity? We are destined to a fool's fate that deserves to be mocked. And since there is no one else around to do the mocking, we will take on the job. So let us indulge in cruel pleasures against ourselves and our pretensions, let us delight in the Cosmic Macabre. At least we may send up a few bitter laughs into the cobwebbed corners of this crusty old universe.

Supernatural horror, in all its eerie constructions, enables a reader to taste treats inconsistent with his personal welfare. Admittedly, this is not a practice likely to find universal favor. True macabrists are as rare as poets and form a secret society by the bad-standing of their memberships elsewhere, some of their outside affiliations having been cancelled as early as birth. But those who have gotten a good whiff of other worlds and sampled a cuisine marginal to stable existence will not be able to stay themselves from the uncanny feast of horrors that has been laid out for them. They will loiter in moonlight, eyeing the entranceways to cemeteries, waiting for some propitious moment to crash the gates and see what is inside.

Once and for all, let us speak the paradox aloud: "We have been force-fed for so long the shudders of a thousand graveyards that at last, seeking a macabre redemption, a salvation by horror, we willingly consume the terrors of the tomb … and find them to our liking."

The Cult of Grinning Martyrs

Institutionalized

Undeniably, one of the great disadvantages of consciousness —that is, consciousness considered as the parent of all horrors—is that it exacerbates necessary sufferings and creates unnecessary ones, such as the fear of death. Not having what it takes to take their own lives (ask Gloria Beatty), those who suffer intolerably learn to hide their afflictions, both necessary and unnecessary, because the world does not run on pain time but on happy time, whether or not that happiness is honestly felt or a mask for the blackest despondency. Every shrewd slave knows enough to be as perky as he is submissive in the presence of his master. And those seated in the head offices of the earth know that gales of happy talk must be blown the way of ordinary folk, who need to hear that things are all right all the time, or, if they are not all right, soon will be. Whether your ambition is to rule over your fellows or simply to maneuver among them, a show of jaunty optimism is requisite.

In a section of *The World as Will and Representation* where Schopenhauer argues that only pain is real while pleasure is an illusion, the philosopher writes: "I cannot here withhold the statement that *optimism,* where it is not merely the thoughtless talk of those who harbor nothing but words under their shallow foreheads, seems to me to be not merely an absurd, but also a really *wicked,* way of thinking, a bitter mockery of the most unspeakable sufferings of mankind" (Schopenhauer's emphasis). Those who do not wholly endorse Schopenhauer's opinion of optimism can still gain some understanding of what he is talking about when they behold a spittle-chinned demagogue bawling out homilies and lies to a rapt audience. It is on such occasions that optimism reveals itself as so noisome that even those who custom-

arily prefer an optimistic spell to be cast upon them may become queasy with a sense of the wickedness that turns the gears of the world-machine. "Wickedness," we know, is a moral term, for those who care about such fabrications. Yet sometimes those who do not usually care a whit about such things are moved to bark out moral recriminations as the horribly clownish face of optimism brightens the sky the better to peruse the bodies and minds being mangled below.

Optimistically wicked or not, most people cannot afford to care, or to care too much, if they are living in the best or the worst of all possible worlds. They can only care about the one thing that, if one is to think of being alive as being all right, is worth caring about—feeling good, or as good as possible, whatever "feeling good" might mean to a certain individual at a certain time. Should anyone ask what you are doing, you might say, "I'm hammering a nail" or "I'm searching for absolute truth." Yet all you are really saying is this: "I'm trying to feel as good as I can." Of course, you may be caught in a tight spot where the best you can feel is not very good or is even very bad. These are situations in which the alternative, or the perceived alternative, is to feel worse. Ergo, you are still trying to feel as good as you can, although you might not see it that way as you mark time feeling not so good until you can once again feel good in the way you like most. But as evolution would have it, we seem to have a "negativity bias" that reins in those feelings which, when we feel them, are felt to be unquestionably good.

As one arm of evolutionary psychology hypothesizes, pleasurable emotions and sensations germinated because they were adaptive.[1] Example: In past ages, climactic release from the stress of carnal desire was solely a catalyst for the generative survival of our species, the link between the two phenomena not yet being known. Following the advent of language, everyone began praising fleshly pleasure, while few, if any, celebrate the biological drive that leads to it, just as everyone praises a good meal but not the hunger that makes it so pleasurable. The analogy between these pleasures and others that are also appetite-driven, such as those of a

drug addict, should be clear. Being freed of a desire is indeed a pleasure. But knowing the remorseless ways of nature, should anyone be thunderstruck that by mutation she has put a lid on the extent of our pleasure and a limit on how long it may last, not to mention favoring pain as the main inducement for our behavior?[2]

If human pleasure did not have both a lid and a time limit, we would not bestir ourselves to do things that were not pleasurable, such as toiling for our subsistence. And then we would not survive. By the same token, should our mass mind ever become discontented with the restricted pleasures doled out by nature, as well as disgruntled over the lack of restrictions on pain, we would omit the mandates of survival from our lives out of a stratospherically acerbic indignation. And then we would not reproduce. As a species, we do not shout into the sky, "The pleasures of this world are not enough for us." In fact, they are just enough to drive us on like oxen pulling a cart full of our calves, which in their turn will put on the yoke. As inordinately evolved beings, though, we can postulate that it will not always be this way. "A time will come," we say to ourselves, "when we will unmake this world in which we are battered between long burden and brief delight, and will live in pleasure for all our days." The belief in the possibility of long-lasting, high-flown pleasures is a deceptive but adaptive flimflam. It seems that nature did not make us to feel too good for too long, which would be no good for the survival of the species, but only to feel good enough for long enough to keep us from complaining that we do not feel good all the time.

In the workaday world, complainers will not go far. When someone asks how you are doing, you had better be wise enough to reply, "I can't complain." If you do complain, even justifiably, people will stop asking how you are doing. Complaining will not help you succeed and influence people. You can complain to your physician or psychiatrist because they are paid to hear you complain. But you cannot complain to your boss or your friends, if you have any. You will soon be dismissed from your job and dropped from the social register.

Then you will be left alone with your complaints and no one to listen to them. Perhaps then the message will sink into your head: If you do not feel good enough for long enough, you should act as if you do and even think as if you do. That is the way to get yourself to feel good enough for long enough and stop you from complaining for good, as any self-improvement book can affirm. But should you not improve, someone must assume the blame. And that someone will be you. This is monumentally so if you are a pessimist or a depressive. Should you conclude that life is objectionable or that nothing matters—do not waste our time with your nonsense. We are on our way to the future, and the philosophically disheartening or the emotionally impaired are not going to hinder our progress. If you cannot say something positive, or at least equivocal, keep it to yourself. Pessimists and depressives need not apply for a position in the enterprise of life. You have two choices: Start thinking the way God and your society want you to think or be forsaken by all. The decision is yours, since you are a free agent who can choose to rejoin our fabricated world or stubbornly insist on … what? That we should mollycoddle non-positive thinkers like you or rethink how the whole world transacts its business? That we should start over from scratch? Or that we should go extinct? Try to be realistic. We did the best we could with the tools we had. After all, we are only human, as we like to say. Our world may not be in accord with nature's way, but it did develop *organically* according to our consciousness, which delivered us to a lofty prominence over the Creation. The whole thing just took on a life of its own, and nothing is going to stop it anytime soon. There can be no starting over and no going back. No major readjustments are up for a vote. And no melancholic head-case is going to bad-mouth our catastrophe. The universe was created by the Creator, damn it. We live in a country we love and that loves us back. We have families and friends and jobs that make it all worthwhile. We are somebodies, not a bunch of nobodies without names or numbers or retirement plans. None of this is going to be overhauled by a thought criminal who contends that the world is not

doubleplusgood and never will be. Our lives may not be unflawed—that would deny us a better future to work toward—but if this charade is good enough for us, then it should be good enough for you. So if you cannot get your mind right, try walking away. You will find no place to go and no one who will have you. You will find only the same old trap the world over. Lighten up or leave us alone. You will never get us to give up our hopes. You will never get us to wake up from our dreams. We are not contradictory beings whose continuance only worsens our plight as mutants who embody the contorted logic of a paradox. Such opinions will not be accredited by institutions of authority or by the middling run of humanity. To lay it on the line, whatever thoughts may enter your chemically imbalanced brain are invalid, inauthentic, or whatever dismissive term we care to hang on you, who are only "one of those people." So start pretending that you feel good enough for long enough, stop your complaining, and get back in line. If you are not as strong as Samson—that no-good suicide and slaughterer of Philistines—then get loaded to the gills and return to the trap. Keep your medicine cabinet and your liquor cabinet well stocked, just like the rest of us. Come on and join the party. No pessimists or depressives invited. Do you think we are morons? We know all about those complaints of yours. The only difference is that we have sense enough and feel good enough for long enough not to speak of them. Keep your powder dry and your brains blocked. Our shibboleth: "Up the Conspiracy and down with Consciousness."

Disillusionment

Antagonistic to any somber ideations, humankind has trained itself to ingest ever-increasing disillusionments and metabolize them without any impairment to its system. By means of self-mastery through conscious autosuggestion, or by whatever means, the biblical Genesis and all other fables of origination have been unproblematically reduced to mythic precursors of the Big Bang theory and the primordial soup. Pantheon after pantheon has been belittled into "things

people used to believe in." And supplications to the Divine are murmured only inside the tents of faith healers or in the minds of the desperate.

The only constraint on disillusionment is the following: It must creep along so sluggishly that almost none can mark its movement. Anyone caught trying to accelerate the progress of disillusionment will be reprimanded and told to sit in the corner, if only in free-world nations where the Church and the State have lost the clout to kill or torture dissenters. A sign of progress, some would say. But sufferance of renegade minds should not lead us into premature self-congratulation. The rate at which our kind plods toward disillusionment is geologically slow, and humanity can be cocksure of its death by natural causes or an "act of God" before it travels very far toward that beatific day when with one voice it might exclaim, "Enough of this error of conscious life. It shall be passed down no longer to those innocents unborn."

In "The Last Messiah," Zapffe conjectures that with the passing of generations the more profligate will become humanity's means of hiding its disillusionments from itself: the more brainless and delusive its isolation from the actualities of existence; the more stupefying and uncouth its distractions from the startling and dreadful; the more heavy-handed and madcap its anchorings in unreality; and the more callous, self-mocking, and detached from life its sublimations in art. These developments will not make us any more paradoxical in our being, but they could make all manifestations of our paradoxical nature less effective and more aberrant. Speaking in terms of his time, and ours, Zapffe writes in "The Last Messiah" of our rising *"spiritual unemployment."*

> The absence of naturally (biologically) based spiritual activity shows up, for example, in the pervasive recourse to *distraction* (entertainment, sport, radio —the "rhythm of the times"). Terms for anchoring are not as favorable—all the inherited, collective systems of anchorings are punctured by criticism, and anxiety, disgust, confusion, despair leaking in through the rifts ("corpses in the cargo"). Communism and psychoanalysis, however incommensurable otherwise, both attempt (as Communism also has a spiritual reflection) by novel means to vary the old escape anew; applying, respectively,

> violence and guile to make humans biologically fit by ensnaring their critical surplus of cognition. The idea, in either case, is uncannily logical. But again, it cannot yield a final solution. Though a deliberate degeneration to a more viable nadir may certainly save the species in the short run, it will by its nature be unable to find peace in such resignation, or indeed find any peace at all….
>
> If we continue on these considerations to the bitter end, then the conclusion is not in doubt. As long as humankind recklessly proceeds in the fateful delusion of being biologically fated for triumph, nothing essential will change. As the numbers mount and the spiritual atmosphere thickens, the techniques of protection must assume an increasingly brutal character.

Rather than being a visionary or a prophet, Zapffe was an analyst of disaster, and his pessimism is nothing if not *down to earth.*

Pressurized

The Romanian-born French writer E. M. Cioran counted among his greatest accomplishments breaking himself of the habit of cigarette smoking and the fact that he never became a parent. Nothing in Cioran's file would lead one to think he was ever tempted to have children. His remark was a derision of people whose fecundity had swollen a world he would rather have seen in ashes. A maestro of pessimism, Cioran published several volumes of philosophical essays and aphorisms that assaulted what he considered the inexcusable crumminess of all creation. Contained in his works is an ample stock of quotable outbursts, any one of which could serve as a synopsis of his conviction that human existence was a wrong turn made by the universe. "Life," he wrote, "is an uprising within the inorganic, a tragic leap out of the inert—life is matter animated and, it must be said, spoiled by pain." But that was just his opinion.

Those who feel they have free will, meaning everyone, also feel they are free to have any opinion they want on any issue before them. They are like those "believers in anything" already mentioned who may have an opinion about whatever they believe to be true. As we know, the premier opinion that has held in all time and places is that there is some sure reason for the continuance of the human species. This opinion is so prevailing that it is usually assumed to be a fact and

not an opinion. In *Reason's Grief: An Essay on Tragedy and Value* (2006), George W. Harris propounds this opinion most poignantly: "While we might … admit that the existence of human and animal suffering is itself a tragedy, it would be a greater tragedy still to end it all. How can we account for this tragic sense, the sense that something would be lost with such a termination?" That it would be a greater tragedy to end all animal and human suffering than to have it continue is an opinion stated as a fact. Granting that "something would be lost with such a termination," it remains to be established whether or not that "something" were better let go than kept going. And that this termination inspires in us a tragic sense for which we need to account is also only Harris's opinion—one that he later, with disarming honesty, concedes is reserved for those who are fortunate enough to have lives they believe are worth having; otherwise, what he calls the "apocalyptic option" would be all right.

Nothing definitive supports the opinion that humanity should persist in being, just as nothing definitive supports the opinion that humanity should cease to exist. In place of universally convincing reasons in this matter, or even commonsense thought, there is pressure. Thus, people who hold the opinion that the human race should go extinct are pressured by the bad opinion of almost all others to excoriate themselves as wrong in having this opinion. All said, the opinion of an anti-natalist is not reckoned a praiseworthy one in this world, and anti-natalists are cognizant of this fact. Unlikewise, pro-natalists are not at all cognizant that their opinion that procreation is all right is not praiseworthy either.

Opinion: There are no praiseworthy incentives to reproduce. For pro-natalists, children are only a means to an end, and none of those ends is praiseworthy. They are the ends of people who already exist, a condition that automatically makes them prejudiced in favor of existence. Yet even though these people think that being alive is all right, they are not at a loss to think of reasons why in some cases it would be better

not to have been. They can only hope that their children will not be one of those cases, for their sake as well as for the sake of their offspring. To have a praiseworthy incentive for bearing a child, one would first have to prove that child to be an end in itself, which no one can prove about anything, least of all about something that does not yet exist. You could *argue,* of course, that a child is an end in itself and is a good in itself. And you could go on arguing until the child ages to death or sickens to death or has a fatal vehicular misadventure. But you cannot argue that anyone comes to an end that is a good in itself. You can only accept that someday he or she will come to an end that is an end in itself, which, as people sometimes say, may be for the best.

In place of arguments pro or con, pressure is brought to bear on breeders-in-waiting to be of the opinion that there is indeed a plethora of praiseworthy incentives for making more of us. The pressure put upon them, biology notwithstanding, takes the guise of the good opinion of others who want them to think, and who themselves think, they are right in having the opinion that procreation is all right. Some may resist this pressure, but they will not be roundly praised for doing so, although they may receive a dispensation if the product of their union is likely to be defective.

Among the least praiseworthy incentives to reproduce are parents' pipe dreams of posterity—that egoistic compulsion to send emissaries into the future who will certify that their makers once lived and still live on, if only in photographs and home movies. Vying for an even less praiseworthy incentive to reproduce is the sometimes irresistible prospect of taking pride in one's children as consumer goods, trinkets or tie-clips, personal accessories that may be shown off around town. But primary among the pressures to propagate is this: To become formally integrated into a society, one must offer it a blood sacrifice. As David Benatar has alleged in *Better Never to Have Been,* all procreators have red hands, morally and ethically speaking.

Naturally, the average set of parents is able to conceive of less reprehensible, but still not praiseworthy, incentives for

reproduction. Among these are the urgency to beat the biological clock or abandon all hope for the legendary enjoyments of the parental role; the desire to solidify a spousal relationship; the wish to please one's own parents with grandchildren; the need of an insurance policy that one's offspring will probably feel obligated to pay off once their begetters are in their dotage; the quelling of a sense of guilt or selfishness for not having done their duty as human beings; and the squelching of that pathos which is associated with the childless.[3]

Such are some of the non-praiseworthy incentives of those who would fertilize the future. And they are all pressures of one kind or another. These pressures build up in people throughout their lifetimes and cry to be released, just as our bowels cry to be released to avoid the discomfort of a fecal build-up. And who, if they could help it, wants the discomfort of a fecal build-up? So we make bowel movements to relieve this pressure. Similarly, quite a few people make gardens because they cannot withstand the pressure of not making a garden. Others commit murder because they cannot withstand the pressure building up within them to kill someone, either a person known to them or a passing stranger. And so on. Our whole lives consist of pressures to make metaphorical as well as actual bowel movements. Releasing these pressures can have greater or lesser consequences in the scheme of our lives. But they are all bowel-movement pressures of some kind. At a certain age, children are praised for making a bowel movement in the approved manner. Later on, the praise of others dies down for this achievement and our bowel movements become our own business, although we may continue to praise ourselves for them. Yet pressures go on influencing our lives, including pressures to have some opinions rather than others, and the proper release of these essentially bowel-movement pressures may once more come up for praise, congratulations, and huzzahs of all kinds.

No different from other species on this planet, the human race flourishes while it can, even though there is no praiseworthy incentive to do so. Nevertheless, we cannot count out

the possibility that with the passing of hundreds or thousands of years we will attain immortality, or something close to it, which would obviate our function as servants of our species whose primary interests are to survive and reproduce ourselves. Let us also presage that at this distant stage of human evolution we have fully fathomed all material matters of the universe—its beginning, its end, and all its workings. Having reached such an intellectual apex, we would need only to bar from our thoughts a single question, one to which there can be no positive answer in either material or metaphysical terms. The question takes various forms. We have already investigated one form of this question: "What use is it to exist?" Herman Tønnessen, in his essay "Happiness Is for the Pigs: Philosophy versus Psychotherapy" (*Journal of Existentialism,* 1967), cites another form of the question: "What is it all about?" He then explains the context and significance of the question.

> Mitja (in *Brothers Karamazov*) felt that though his question may be absurd and senseless, yet he had to ask just that, and he had to ask it in just that way. Socrates bandied about that an unexamined life is not worthy of Man. And Aristotle saw Man's "proper" goal and "proper" limit in the right exercise of those faculties which are uniquely human. It is commonplace that men, unlike other living organisms, are not equipped with built-in mechanisms for automatic maintenance of their existence. Man would perish immediately if he were to respond to his environment exclusively in terms of unlearned biologically inherited forms of behavior. In order to survive, the human being must discover how various things around as well as *in him* operate. And the place he occupies in the present scheme of organic creation is the consequence of having learned how to exploit his intellectual capacities for such discoveries. Hence, more human than any other human longing is the pursuance of a *total* view of Man's function—or malfunction—in the Universe, his possible place and importance in the *widest conceivable cosmic scheme.* In other words it is the attempt to answer, or at least articulate whatever questions are entailed in the dying groan of ontological despair: *What is it all about?* This may well prove biologically harmful or even fatal to Man. Intellectual honesty and Man's high spiritual demands for order and meaning may drive Man to the deepest antipathy to life and necessitate, as one existentialist chooses to express it: "A *no* to this wild, banal, grotesque and loathsome carnival in the world's graveyard." (Emphasis in original)

The quote at the end of this excerpt from Tønnessen's essay is taken from Zapffe's *On the Tragic.* While Tønnessen believes that "intellectual honesty" must lead to "ontological despair,"

ultimately his preference is for living the heroic life of a clear-eyed desperado of pessimism—after the existential stylings of Miguel de Unamuno, Albert Camus, William Brashear, Joshua Foa Dienstag, and others—rather than wallowing in the self-deceptive happiness of a human pig. In principle, there does seem to be a moral divide between the way of the desperado and that of the pig; practically, there is none. Both are spoiling for survival in a MALIGNANTLY USELESS world. And survival is for the pigs.

Ask Professor Nobody about reasoning the state of our lives to the limit. Tilting again toward stridency, here is what he has to say on the subject in "Pessimism and Supernatural Horror—Lecture Two."

Dead bodies that walk in the night, living bodies suddenly possessed by new owners and deadly aspirations, bodies without sensible form, and a body of unnatural laws in accordance with which tortures and executions are meted out—some examples of the logic of supernatural horror. It is a logic founded on fear, a logic whose sole principle states: "Existence equals nightmare." Unless life is a dream, nothing makes sense. For as a reality, it is a rank failure. A few more examples: a trusting soul catches the night in a bad mood and must pay a dreadful price; another opens the wrong door, sees something he should not have, and suffers the consequences; still another walks down an unfamiliar street … and is *lost* forever.

That we all deserve punishment by horror is as mystifying as it is undeniable. To be an accomplice, however involuntarily, in a reasonless non-reality is cause enough for the harshest sentencing. But we have been trained so well to accept the "order" of an unreal world that we do not rebel against it. How could we? Where pain and pleasure form a corrupt alliance against us, paradise and hell are merely different divisions in the same monstrous bureaucracy. And between these two poles exists everything we know or can ever know. It is not even possible to imagine a utopia, earthly or otherwise, that can stand up under the mildest criticism.

But one must take into account the shocking fact that we live on a world that *spins.* After considering this truth, nothing should come as a surprise.

Still, on rare occasions we do overcome hopelessness or velleity and make mutinous demands to live in a real world, one that is at least episodically ordered to our advantage. But perhaps it is only a demon of some kind that moves us to such idle insubordination, the more so to aggravate our condition in the unreal. After all, is it not wondrous that we are allowed to be both witnesses and victims of the sepulchral pomp of wasting tissue? And one thing we know is real: horror. It is so real, in fact, that we cannot be sure it could not exist without us. Yes, it needs our imaginations and our consciousness, but it does not ask or require our consent to use them. Indeed, horror operates with complete autonomy. Generating ontological havoc, it is mephitic foam upon which our lives merely float. And, ultimately, we must face up to it: Horror is more real than we are.

Autopsy on a Puppet: An Anatomy of the Supernatural

Atmosphere

Billions of years had to pass following the formation of the earth before its atmosphere became … atmospheric. This transition could only have occurred with the debut of consciousness—parent of all horrors and the matrix of atmosphere. With our bodies bogged down in the ordure of this world, our new faculty instigated the genesis of other worlds, invisible ontologies that infiltrated appearances. Now we could feel the presence of things beyond the reach of our physical senses. The circumference of our fears dilated with further expansions of consciousness. Under the cover of atmosphere there seemed to be another side to the realm of being we knew, or thought we knew. Seeing shadows in the moonlight and hearing leaves rustling in the wind, our ancestors impregnated these sights and sounds with imaginings and apprehensions. Atmosphere had finally arrived, both foreshadowing horror and taking its substance from horror. Without this alliance, the first horror stories could not have been told.

As the horror story matured and branched out, so did the qualities of its atmosphere, most of all among the great names of this literary genre. For these writers, the atmosphere of their works is as unique as a signature or a fingerprint. It is the index of an identifiable consciousness that has been brewed from an amalgam of sensations, memories, emotions, and everything else that makes individuals what they are and predetermines what they will express as artists. Thus Lovecraft, in a 1935 letter to Catherine L. Moore, wrote these remarks on the weird story:

> It must, if it is to be authentic art, form primarily *the crystallization or symbolization of a definite human mood—not* the attempted delineation of *events,* since the "events" involved are of course largely fictitious and impossible. These events should figure *secondarily—atmosphere* being first. All real art must somehow be connected with *truth,* and in the case of weird art the emphasis must fall upon the one factor representing truth—certainly not the events (!!!) but the *mood of intense and fruitless human aspiration typified by the pretended overturning of cosmic laws and the pretended transcending of possible human experience.* (Lovecraft's emphasis)

The works in which Lovecraft most successfully put his theoretics of atmosphere into practice are paradigms of weird (or supernatural horror) fiction. Yet he wrote himself off as a failure in his pursuit to get on paper what he had in his head and strove to the end of his life to do what no other horror writer had done before him nor will ever do: lay bare his consciousness in an artifact. By the stress he placed on atmosphere, Lovecraft showed the way to an analysis of this element in horror literature, and, by extension, to an evaluation of the genre as a whole. While his personal use for atmosphere was to facilitate a sense of cosmic laws being overturned and human experience being transcended, he also defined the general purpose of atmosphere in horror stories: to give consistency (mood) to an imagined world in which we can at least pretend to escape from our mere humanity and enter into spaces where the human has no place and dies to itself either weeping or screaming or in awe at the horror of existence. Here lies the paradox of consuming horror as an escapist venture.

The secret of atmosphere in supernatural horror is simplicity itself. Already spoken of in the first paragraph of this chapter, it is here repeated and made categorical: Atmosphere is created by anything that suggests an ominous state of affairs beyond what our senses perceive and our minds can fully comprehend. It is the signature motif that Schopenhauer made discernible in pessimism—that behind the scenes of life there is something pernicious that makes a nightmare of our world. This something, this ominous state of affairs beyond what our senses perceive and our minds can comprehend, has previously been discussed in connection with

Blackwood's "The Willows." In this story, Blackwood was careful not to dissipate with explanatory details the atmosphere he created. Lovecraft admired this work for its evocation of "nameless presences" that remain nameless and yet are powerfully felt. This is not a rule that Lovecraft himself often followed, as is particularly evident in his later stories. In such works as "The Dunwich Horror" and *At the Mountains of Madness,* Lovecraft details and analyzes and, unlike Blackwood in the "The Willows," *names* the monstrosities at the center of these narratives. Nevertheless, there are always unparalleled images and ideas in Lovecraft's fiction that stay with the reader and instill a feeling of unknown horrors surpassing those that have been made known.

From the perspective of atmosphere, horror fiction may be dated only as far back as the novels of Ann Radcliffe, which contain enough visionary mood to make up for their bodice-ripper plots. Radcliffe's genius resided in turning a rage in the late eighteenth century for the picturesque in natural topographies into one that emphasized sublime dread as an aesthetic. Her works are known for the descriptions they contain of landscapes featuring mountains of intimidating height, valleys vast and deep, and moody twilights. Here quoted is such a view as witnessed by Emily St. Aubert, the heroine of Radcliffe's most popular novel, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). In this scene, Montoni, the story's malefactor, is delivering Emily and her aunt to his home. (Please bear with yet a few more long excerpts, ones from a long novel in which Radcliffe at length and often entertained her readers with sublimely thrilling carriage rides.)

> Towards the close of day, the road wound into a deep valley. Mountains, whose shaggy steeps appeared to be inaccessible, almost surrounded it. To the east, a vista opened, that exhibited the Apennines in their darkest horrors; and the long perspective of retiring summits, rising over each other, their ridges clothed with pines, exhibited a stronger image of grandeur, than any that Emily had yet seen. The sun had just sunk below the top of the mountains she was descending, whose long shadow stretched athwart the valley, but his sloping rays, shooting through an opening of the cliffs, touched with a yellow gleam the summits of the forest, that hung upon the opposite steeps, and streamed in full splendour upon the towers and battle-

ments of a castle, that spread its extensive ramparts along the brow of a precipice above. The splendour of these illumined objects was heightened by the contrasted shade, which involved the valley below.

"There," said Montoni, speaking for the first time in several hours, "is Udolpho."

Emily's initial sighting of Udolpho elicits the same kind of tingling sensation she feels for nature's mixed effects of minatory gigantism and soul-striking splendor.

Emily gazed with melancholy awe upon the castle, which she understood to be Montoni's; for, though it was now lighted up by the setting sun, the gothic greatness of its features, and its mouldering walls of dark grey stone, rendered it a gloomy and sublime object. As she did, the light died away on its walls, leaving a melancholy purple tint, which spread deeper and deeper, as the thin vapour crept up the mountain, while the battlements above were still tipped with splendour. From those, too, the rays soon faded, and the whole edifice was invested with the solemn duskiness of evening. Silent, lonely, and sublime, it seemed to stand the sovereign of the scene, and to frown defiance on all, who dared to invade its solitary reign. As the twilight deepened, its features became more awful in obscurity, and Emily continued to gaze, till its clustering towers were alone seen, rising over the tops of the woods, beneath whose thick shade the carriages soon after began to ascend.

The extent and darkness of these tall woods awakened terrific images in her mind, and she almost expected to see banditti start up from under the trees. At length, the carriages emerged upon a heathy rock, and, soon after, reached the castle gates, where the deep tone of the portal bell, which was struck upon to give notice of their arrival, increased the fearful emotions, that had assailed Emily. While they waited till the servant within should come to open the gates, she anxiously surveyed the edifice: but the gloom, that overspread it, allowed her to distinguish little more than a part of its outline, with the massy walls of the ramparts, and to know, that it was vast, ancient and dreary. From the parts she saw, she judged of the heavy strength and extent of the whole. The gateway before her, leading into the courts, was of gigantic size, and was defended by two round towers, crowned by overhanging turrets, embattled, where, instead of banners, now waved long grass and wild plants, that had taken root among the mouldering stones, and which seemed to sigh, as the breeze rolled past, over the desolation around them. The towers were united by a curtain, pierced and embattled also, below which appeared the pointed arch of a huge portcullis, surmounting the gates: from these, the walls of the ramparts extended to other towers, overlooking the precipice, whose shattered outline, appearing on a gleam, that lingered in the west, told of the ravages of war.—Beyond these all was lost in the obscurity of evening.

The horrid vicissitudes of Emily's stay at Udolpho further extend the spirit-stirring and densely atmospheric world in which she is immersed. To move along the plots of her essentially romantic narratives, Radcliffe entrapped her heroines

in castles so great and gloomy that their dungeons seem to have dungeons and their towers appear to the imagination to sprout supplementary towers into infinity. Within such gargantuan settings, Radcliffe's young women are terrorized by men of a wicked nature. They are also terrorized by simulacra of the supernatural that are later exposed as being natural in origin. Then they are rescued by their beloveds and, presumably, live gladsome lives unmarred by their traumatic experiences.

Some readers and critics disapprove of Radcliffe's ex post facto rationalizing of what seemed at the time to have been depictions of bona fide supernatural events, which for them dispels much of the frightful atmosphere she worked so diligently to create. The protest is that if she did not explain her way back to nature, her protagonists would have had to look into the face of a metaphysical horror that challenges one's concept of reality rather than the lesser horror of having to marry a man of bad character. It must seem a paradox, then, that Radcliffe is credited here as the parent of supernatural atmosphere when there are no supernatural happenings in her narratives. The resolution to this paradox is discussed in the section *Supernaturalism* later in this chapter. For now, let us listen to what Lovecraft had to say about Radcliffe as an author "who set new and higher standards in the domain of macabre and fear-inspiring atmosphere despite a provoking custom of destroying her own phantoms at the last through labored mechanical explanations."

> To the familiar Gothic trappings of her predecessors Mrs. Radcliffe added a genuine sense of the unearthly in scene and incident which closely approached genius; every touch of setting and action contributing artistically to the impression of illimitable frightfulness which she wished to convey. A few sinister details like a track of blood on castle stairs, a groan from a distant vault, or a weird song in a nocturnal forest can with her conjure up the most powerful images of imminent horror; surpassing by far the extravagant and toilsome elaborations of others. Nor are these images in themselves any the less potent because they are explained away before the end of the novel. (*Supernatural Horror in Literature,* 1927; revised 1933–35)

The only real disappointment of Radcliffe's novels is that she did not follow through on the death threats to her main char-

acters with their actual deaths, which, considering each of her novels in whole, burns off some of their atmospheric set-up with the resplendent sun of a happy ending. But to leave her heroines or heroes lying dead at the end of one of her narratives would have violated the terms of the genre of Gothic romance in which she wrote. And that would truly have been a blemish on her record as an adept storyteller. Atmospherically, death itself had not yet been added as an element to concentrate the effect of a horror tale.

The next innovation in atmosphere began with Poe in the early nineteenth century. Poe was familiar with Radcliffe's works, which laid the groundwork of the Gothic genre and registered brisk sales. Possibly in reaction to Radcliffe, he turned the world of scenic thrills and salvation upside down in "The Fall of the House of Usher." The story begins at evening as its narrator approaches on horseback a secluded mansion flanked by a swampy and putrid-looking tarn. While the House of Usher may at first seem to be oozing an enchanting Gothic atmosphere, the narrator goes out of his way to argue that this is not so. The dilapidated manse, which has a deep crack running across its façade, is not sublimely desolate in the manner of the ruined castles of Radcliffe's novels. It is rather a locus of indomitable despair. Here is how we see the Usher estate through the eyes of the character who has come to visit the old pile.

> I know not how it was—but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. I say insufferable; for the feeling was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment, with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible. I looked upon the scene before me—upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain—upon the bleak walls—upon the vacant eye-like windows—upon a few rank sedges—and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees—with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveler upon opium—the bitter lapse into everyday life—the hideous dropping off of the veil. There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart—an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime. What was it—I paused to think—what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? It was a mystery all insoluble; nor could I grapple with the shadowy fancies that crowded upon me as I pondered. I was forced to fall back

> upon the unsatisfactory conclusion, that while, beyond doubt, there are combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth. It was possible, I reflected, that a mere different arrangement of the particulars of the scene, of the details of the picture, would be sufficient to modify, or perhaps to annihilate its capacity for sorrowful impression; and, acting upon this idea, I reined my horse to the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled lustre by the dwelling, and gazed down—but with a shudder even more thrilling than before—upon the remodeled and inverted images of the grey sedge, and the ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant and eye-like windows.

However the narrator tries to relish rather than be distraught by the atmosphere of the house and its bedraggled grounds, he cannot do so. From the tenor of this beginning, the reader can expect no saving outcome. The atmosphere Poe created in the introductory section of his greatest tale is genuinely atmospheric because it bodes doom, which can mean only one thing—death. And in "The Fall of the House of Usher" such is the portion of Roderick and Madeline, the brother and sister who are the last of their family to occupy the hereditary domicile. Furthermore, the precarious condition of the house worsens to the point where the structure itself begins to cave. To thicken this climate of demise, the light of a blood-red moon shines through a widening breach in the masonry of the Usher abode as it sinks stone by stone beneath the still surface of the noxious tarn. Earlier the narrator told us of the identity that the local townspeople perceived between the House of Usher and its inhabitants. Admirably, Poe's tale culminates in the extinction of both. With this conclusion, Radcliffe's picturesque Gothic world had been supplanted by an atmosphere spilling out of death—the most ominous state of affairs with which we must deal.

In his tales, Poe created a world that is wholly evil, desolate, and doomed. These qualities give consistency to his imagined world. And there is no escape from this world, only a fall into it. Poe's enclosure of the reader in an environment without an exit distinguishes his works from those of earlier writers like Radcliffe. His characters do not take us from place to place looking at the scenery. They are inside a world that has no outside—no well-mapped places from which one can

come and none to which one can go. The reader of Poe never has the sense that anything exists outside the frame of his narratives. What they suggest is that the only thing beyond what our senses can perceive and our mind can fully comprehend is blackness, nothing. It is the same in those most atmospheric of experiences we all know—dreams.

When you dream, you do not feel that anything exists which is not in your immediate surroundings. You cannot be anywhere in a dream except the place you are already in. Besides the psychological entrapment of dreams, there is also their fundamental strangeness, and Poe was expert at insinuating this phenomenon into his stories. Reading "The Fall of the House of Usher" is like having a lucid dream: We know that everything we see is unreal, yet there is paradoxically a heightened reality to it all. To awaken from such a dream is to lose your freedom from yourself and return to an onerous embodiment where consciousness is a tragedy and you cannot soar unscathed within an atmosphere of death. You can only die.

It was almost a century after the 1839 publication of "The Fall of the House of Usher" that Lovecraft took a giant step in the art of atmospherics with his "Call of Cthulhu." Well known as they may be to readers of horror fiction, the story's introductory sentences require transcription here.

> The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.

From Lovecraft's overture to this tale, the reader may surmise that besides the death of a character or two, the human race itself may go under by voyaging too far on the "black seas of infinity." While the above statement is abstract, it is all the more atmospheric for being so, and we are ardent to read what "dissociated knowledge," not a stunningly evocative

phrase, has been pieced together by one Francis Wayland Thurston, who is displaced from his old reality and set into an ill-starred fictional world that makes all of his former days seem a heaven of naïveté.

"I have looked upon all that the universe has to hold of horror," F. W. Thurston writes after he has pieced together the puzzle, "and even the skies of spring and the flowers of summer must ever afterward be poison to me." In other words, he has done what no one has been in a position to do before him —sort out the worst of existence from any compensatory dividends, a process which leads him to conclude that life is a malignancy it were better not to know. This is Lovecraft's atmosphere—that of a world in which the "frightful position" he has placed all human existence could lead to universal madness or extinction at a moment's notice. Through this atmosphere, Lovecraft gives consistency to an imagined world where there is greatness in knowing too much of the horror of a planet in the shadow of Cthulhu and all that this implies about our existence. As for those people who still go about their ordinary, average business complacently enjoying the skies of spring and the flowers of summer, innocently unaware of the monstrosities with which they coexist—they are children. They have no idea that there is nothing worth living for in Lovecraft's world. They are not in its atmosphere. Yet at any time they could be. It must be remembered that the atmosphere of a supernatural world and its horror exists only in the human imagination. There is nothing like it in nature, nor can nature provoke it. It is a contrivance of our consciousness, and only we can know it among all the organisms of the earth. We are alone in our minds with the atmosphere of a supernatural world and its horror. We are both its creators and what it has created—uncanny things that have nothing to do with the rest of creation.

Theme

The literary world may be divided into two unequal groups: the insiders and the outsiders. The former are many and the latter are few. The placement of a given writer into one group

or the other could be approached by assessing the consciousness of that writer as it is betrayed by various components of his work, including verbal style, general tone of voice, selection of subjects and themes, etc. As any reader knows, such things do vary among authors. To pin any of them down within a capricious or oneiric taxonomy of insiders and outsiders would then perforce become an experiment in uselessness.

Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Jean-Paul Sartre, Samuel Beckett, T. S. Eliot, Knut Hamsun, Hermann Hesse: who is on the inside and who is on the outside? The brain reels when considering well-known works by these writers, as they seem to express sensibilities at several arms' length from those of average mortals. Immediately, we recall Hemingway's story "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," which ends with a travesty of the Lord's Prayer: "Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name." Then our thoughts turn to the collection of degenerates in Faulkner's novels, which do not seem intent on showing off the nobler side, if there is one, of the human race. Nor should we forget Eliot's homage to entropy, *The Waste Land* (1922), or the unbalanced protagonists who lead us through Hamsun's *Hunger* (1890), Hesse's *Steppenwolf* (1928), Sartre's *Nausea* (1938), and the entire output of Beckett. Conveniently, the status of these authors—insider or outsider—has been adjudicated for us by the Swedish committees that dispensed to each of them a Nobel Prize in literature, which is annually given out to authors who produce "the most outstanding work of an idealistic tendency."

But should these literary greats be classed as insiders exclusively because they received a *prize* from a panel of Swedish judges? Some would say "yes," but not entirely because of the Nobel. Some would say "no," despite the Nobel.[1] These conflicting opinions leave our job unfinished insofar as determining the consciousness of an author to be that of an insider or an outsider. To expedite this inquest, we could use a candidate whose credentials unambiguously place him in the latter group. To fill this position, any number of worthy outsiders could be named. One of them is Roland Topor,

whose short horror novel *The Tenant* (1964) is a document that expresses the consciousness of an unimpeachable outsider. To discern with a modest confidence what places a writer on the inside or the outside, *The Tenant* will be compared with another short novel that shares its theme, *One, No One, and One Hundred Thousand* (1926) by the Nobel Prize-winning Luigi Pirandello. In itself, theme is no giveaway of an author's consciousness. What counts is how that theme is resolved. Pirandello's resolution parades the symptoms of "an idealistic tendency," while Topor's takes the anti-idealist position.

The theme of *One, No One, and One Hundred Thousand* is explicitly that of the self as a falsehood born of our systems of perception and cognition. In contrast to the dogma of the many, as Pirandello's narrator and leading character Vitangelo Moscarda comes to appreciate, the self is an insubstantial construct invented to lend coherence and meaning to an existence that is actually chaotic and meaningless. While we all have bodies, we also recognize—only because we are occasionally forced to do so—that they are unstable, damage-prone, and disposable phenomena. Simultaneously, we believe—until a malignant brain lesion or some life-rending event causes us to question this belief—that our "selves" are more sturdy, enduring, and real than the deteriorating tissue in which they are encased.

In *One, No One, and One Hundred Thousand,* Moscarda is made aware of his misperception of his self, and by extension of the entire world of forms in which the self functions, by a misperception he has made about his body. Early in the story, he believes his nose to be evenly structured on its right and left sides. Then his wife tells him that his nose is not symmetrical but is lower on the left side than on the right. Being an incurably pensive individual, Moscarda is troubled by his wife's remark; being an intellectually honest individual, he has to admit it is true. That he misperceived this single feature of his appearance leads Moscarda to investigate what other delusions he has been entertaining about his appear-

ance throughout his life. He ascertains a constellation of them. After scrupulous self-examination of his physical person, he grants that he is not the man he thought he was. Now he believes he is an outsider to himself—a figment in his own eyes and in the eyes of others.

Later, Moscarda is condemned to further revelations: "I still believed this outsider was only one person: only one for everybody, as I thought I was only one for myself. But soon my horrible drama became more complicated." This occurs when he discovers "the hundred thousand Moscardas that I was, not only for the others but also for myself, all with this one name of Moscarda, ugly to the point of cruelty, all inside this poor body of mine that was also one, one and, alas, no one…." Fortunately for Moscarda, and ruefully for the reader (at least the reader who is an outsider), he comes to accept the unreality of everything he had conceived himself to be and becomes one with all that exists. He no longer thinks but simply *is.* "This is the only way I can live now. To be reborn moment by moment. To prevent thought from working again inside me…." The last paragraph of the novel is an exaltation of his new state of existence.

> The city is far away. There comes to me occasionally, upon the vesper calm, the sound of its bells. I, however, no longer hear those bells within me, but without, ringing for themselves and perhaps trembling with joy in their resounding cavities, in a beautiful blue sky filled with a warm sun, to the twittering of swallows or swaying heavily to wind and cloud, so high, so high, in their aerial belfries. To think of death, to pray. It may be that there is one who yet has need of this, and it is to his need that the bells give voice. I no longer have any such need, for the reason that I am dying every instant, and being born anew and without memories: alive and whole, no longer in myself, but in everything outside. (Trans. Samuel Putnam)

End of story. Things turn out all right for Moscarda. He is now an outsider who has been *saved.* In his loss of a self, he brings to mind U. G. Krishnamurti, John Wren-Lewis, and Suzanne Segal—those unwitting prodigies who recovered from shocks to their systems, following which the cognitive mechanisms which produce a fictive ego shut down. In these instances, the individual who loses himself is the beneficiary of a rapturous payoff. This is truly a "good death" in which

someone disappears as a purported self and is reborn as … no one. He is content just to exist, and equally content not to exist.

But does anyone really believe that Luigi Pirandello knew first-hand his protagonist's state of selfless beatitude? Or is it more likely that he just imagined this ending of a decidedly "idealistic tendency"? Yet whether Pirandello actually experienced or merely researched the ideal resolution to Moscarda's painful self-consciousness, it is not a resolution available to the reader, who could follow Moscarda's route to salvation step-by-step and never be delivered to the promised land of the ego-dead. If it were so, Pirandello would have discovered the most phenomenal cure ever known for the sufferings especially reserved for humankind. He would have solved every scourge we face as a species. As one might expect, though, he did no such thing. Instead, Pirandello resolved his fairy tale by lowering down a deus ex machina. His book is a moral scam with mystical transcendence standing in for the prayer Moscarda says he no longer needs. This is what the literary insider offers. In *The Tenant,* Roland Topor supplies the opposing view of the outsider.

When Pirandello's character Moscarda describes his escalating puzzlement over his identity as a "horrible drama," his words appear as a formality—a perfunctory gesture that fails to convey the uncanny nature of his situation. In *The Tenant,* on the other hand, Topor affectingly dramatizes the horror of his non-hero Trelkovsky as he traverses the same terrain as his Italian counterpart. A critical passage in Topor's novel begins with the following sentence: "'At what precise moment,' Trelkovsky asked himself, 'does an individual cease to be the person he—and everyone else—believes himself to be?'"

A Parisian with a Slavic name, Trelkovsky is an outsider and moves in a world where outsiders are persecuted, as they are in the real world. Hoping to move into a new apartment—one previously occupied by a woman named Simone Choule, who was critically injured and not expected to live—he is made to feel as if he is nobody by the landlord, Monsieur Zy,

and then by the other residents of this sinister place. By flexing their self-appointed grandiosity, Trelkovsky's persecutors can maintain their own delusional status as somebodies, real persons who are well-adapted to the hell they have created for themselves.

Anyone who is marked as being outside of the group is fair game for those who would assert *their* reality over all others. Yet they, too, are nobodies. If they were not, their persecutions would not be required: They could pass their lives with a sure mindfulness of their substance and value. But as any good Buddhist (or even Pirandello's Moscarda) could tell you, human beings have no more substance and value than anything else on earth. The incapacity to repose alongside both the mountains and the mold of this planet is the fountainhead of the torments we wreak on one another. As long as we deny a person or group the claim to be as right and as real as we are, so long may we hold this dreamlike claim for ourselves alone. And it is the duty of everyone to inculcate a sense of being empty of substance and value in those who are not emulations of them.

Without being consciously aware of it, Trelkovsky experiences an epiphany at the midpoint of the novel that is inspired by his neighbors' behavior toward him: "'The bastards!' Trelkovsky raged. "'The bastards! What the hell do they want—for everyone to roll over and play dead! And even that probably wouldn't be enough!'" He is more right than he knows. Because what they want is for everyone to roll over and play *them.*

> Martians—they were all Martians.... They were strangers on this planet, but they refused to admit it. They played at being perfectly at home.... He was no different.... He belonged to their species, but for some unknown reason he had been banished from their company. They had no confidence in him. All they wanted from him was obedience to their incongruous rules and their ridiculous laws. Ridiculous only to him, because he could never fathom their intricacy and their subtlety.

Trelkovsky's neighbors cannot admit to themselves what he comes to realize: Everybody is nobody; no one is empowered to define who he or she is. But people do arrogate to them-

selves the authority to make a ruling on who *you* are, and you will stand mute before their bench. From the outset, Trelkovsky is manipulated to accept this verdict; finally, he pronounces it on himself. To his broken mind it seems that the only way to defy his neighbors' murderous conspiracy against him is to cooperate in it. He does this by allowing himself to fall from the window of his apartment and through the glass roofing over the courtyard below. The first time does not kill him, so he hauls his bloody anti-self back up the stairs, jeering at his neighbors who have come out to lunge at his body with sharp objects. He then falls a second time from the window. Following in the footsteps of Gloria Beatty, he decides to call it quits in the world's lugubrious game. Interestingly, *The Tenant* concludes with the same kind of leap beyond the mundane as does *One, No One, and One Hundred Thousand.* Sadly for Trelkovsky, it is a leap in the opposite direction. More accurately, it is a leap that does not deliver Topor's protagonist from his "horrible drama" but one that catapults him into the outermost nightmare of nobodies.

As an insider, Pirandello resolved the theme of *One, No One, and One Hundred Thousand* in a spirit-lifting mode. Imbued with a different consciousness, the outsider can only give us resolutions of a miserablist nature. For the past few slivers of human history, those of us living in what is termed the free world have been allowed to hold disparate worldviews, but only on the condition that they affirm, directly or indirectly, the survival of the species. They must not be pessimistic, nihilistic, or in any respect skeptical about the livability of human life. Such perspectives might well be valued by outsiders, but insiders, who form the preponderant division of humankind, will not incorporate the outsider's stark attitudes and unhappy endings into their philosophies, ideologies, national policies, or fraternal by-laws. Both Pirandello and Topor dealt with the identical theme: the transformative dissolution of one's self-concept. The former writer ended his story with a portrait of a man who joyously transcends himself by becoming the "no one" in the novel's title. This resolu-

tion has already been deplored as a put-up job. An insider might say as much about the ending of Topor's novel, which implies a descent into nightmare that Trelkovsky never saw coming.

In the epilogue to *The Tenant,* it turns out that Trelkovsky survives what should have been his death-plunge. But he does so in a strange way. Regaining consciousness in a hospital bed, he sees he has a visitor. And now everything comes home to him. (Anyone can tell where this is going.) The hospital bed where he now reclines is the same one that, at the beginning of the story, he stood beside as he looked over the bandage-hidden body of his apartment's former tenant, whom he wanted to see for himself was not going to recover from her injuries and try to reclaim her old lodgings. She, too, had fallen from the window of that shabby residence. The newly bedridden patient, like the one before, identifies to his horror the one who has come to visit him. It is himself. Immobilized by his injuries and his face dressed to expose only one eye and an opening for his mouth, he realizes that he has changed places with the woman whose apartment he once coveted. Perhaps not for the first time, as he might be caught in a loop of reincarnations, he has come to be at his own bedside. Realizing what has happened to him, the one in the bed, he already knows what is going to happen to the one standing over him, the one who is not him anymore, and yet is. Trelkovsky has now solved his (and Moscarda's) riddle: "At what precise moment does an individual cease to be the person he—and everyone else—believes himself to be?" Answer: at the moment when an individual becomes conscious that he has been trapped in a paradox of identity and there is no way out for him as long as he believes himself to be something he is not. Ask any puppet that thinks it is a person.

As neither Pirandello nor Topor underwent the transformative dissolution of the self-concept that is the common theme of their stories—it would be the high point of each man's biography if they had—are they not equally disingenuous? The answer to that question would seem to turn upon which au-

thor's representation of the world you deem to be more symbolically well-founded: ending one's days in serene communion with all that makes up the world … or trapped in a damaged body in a hospital bed, unable to do anything but scream at the sight of a clueless wraith, the nobody who was you in the dream that was your life. Whichever conclusion to these thematically analogous stories appears more faithful to human experience depends on who you are … or who you think you are. This is a very Pirandellian theme.

While Topor's vision seems empirically sturdier, Pirandello's is the crowd favorite. To receive the prize Pirandello awards Moscarda, if only for a moment before one's death, would make amends for a lifetime of lashings. Grievously, just because something is a desideratum does not mean that believing in it will save you. But Pirandello and his kind want you, and themselves, to die trying. All Topor and his kind have to say is that you should always have your affairs in order, which may bring you some peace of mind if you are confined to a hospital bed … or only looking for a new apartment.

Characters

In his essay "The Undelivered," Cioran wrote: "The more we consider the Buddha's last exhortation, 'Death is inherent in all created things; labor ceaselessly for your salvation,' the more we are troubled by the impossibility of *feeling* ourselves as an aggregate, a transitory if not fortuitous convergence of elements." Cioran could not have been more right about the impossibility of feeling oneself to be a thing of parts, a being made as it is made. Transporting our selves to and fro on the earth and walking up and down upon it, we are doggedly believable *characters,* although we are not provably anything more than that. Yet we do seem to be more than that, and seeming is enough for us to get by as we have all these years.

In the course of our disillusionments, we have confessed to being bodies made of elementary particles just like everything else. But we must stop short of any tidings that would put us on a par with bacteria and beer mugs. That

would be to skyrocket disillusionment out of the atmosphere, leaving us without a speck of our invaluable selves and the games they play. One game that most writers of horror fiction play with their characters is called Good versus Evil. And they play it as if it were the only game in town. Certainly it is the oldest game in town, the one we have relied on for much of our characterization from the time we first knew who we were, or thought we did. A few horror writers, though, play a different game, one in which, as Poe wrote, "Horror is the soul of the plot" rather than believable characters. The game of Good versus Evil is about horror *in* the world, and its players, its characters, are given a fighting chance. The other game is about the horror *of* the world, and none of its players has a chance, unless by pure chance.

For example, compare two horror novels that presume the reality of supernatural possession—William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist* (1971) and Lovecraft's *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* (written 1927; published posthumously, 1941). In the world of Blatty's Good-versus-Evil novel, certain believable characters are dressed for doom and others for survival. (This is a formulaic element of nearly all popular horror novels.) Two priests, Frs. Karras and Merrin, give their lives to save Regan, a believable characterization of a young girl whose body, and perhaps her soul—the relationship between body and soul among Christian sects is not consistent—has been possessed by a demon or demons. The deaths of these priests are acceptable to readers as part of the story's formula, despite the fact that they are the sort of characters whom ordinary folk *care about.* Burke Dennings, the director of the movie in which Regan's actress mother Chris MacNeill stars, is murdered by the possessed Regan. He is not a terribly likeable fellow, being a profane and belligerent drunk, so the function he serves is that of a character who can be killed off to advance the narrative in a shocking direction, since the reader does not care much about him, however believable he may be. This is very acceptable to readers, who are within their rights to expect at least one person to be slain over the course of a horror novel. Such is the way that the greater part of

those who patronize works of fiction like to see writers handle their characters—believably. They also want a finale in which Good wins out over Evil, which assures them that the formula "being alive is all right" is the right formula.

The Case of Charles Dexter Ward is in every way a negation of Blatty's *Exorcist.* In Lovecraft's novel, the universe cares nothing for human life, just as it is in the real world, and one does not care about the characters—they are only a perspective from which to view the horror of the plot. This is acceptable to very few readers. Good and Evil are rubrics of an existential code long gone, just as they are in the real world. Again, this is acceptable to very few readers. And the idea of human beings as creatures with souls is not an issue in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* because it was not an issue for Lovecraft. Everyone, not only the hapless protagonist of the book, exists in a world that is a wall-to-wall nightmare. In Lovecraft's *universe without a formula,* everyone is killable—and some kill themselves just ahead of the worse things waiting for them. Life as we conceive it, let alone a configuration of atoms that goes by the name Charles Dexter Ward, occurs in a context of permanent jeopardy which only remains to be discovered and from which there is no salvation. Lovecraft does not want to take you on an emotional roller-coaster ride, at the end of which he tells you to watch your step as your car comes to a stop and you settle back onto steady ground. He simply wants to say that we no longer have to stand back very far to see that the human race is what it always has been in this or any other world—irrelevant, which is as liberating to some as it is maddening to others, including Lovecraft's characters.

Lovecraft's employment of supernatural possession as a storytelling device in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* is so alien to Blatty's in *The Exorcist* that the two men might as well have been living in different centuries, or even different millennia. The narrative parameters of *The Exorcist* begin and end with the New Testament; those of *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* could only have been conceived by a fiction writer of the modern era, a time when it had become safe not only to place humanity outside the center of the Creation but

also to survey the universe itself as centerless and our species as only a smudge of organic materials at the mercy of forces that know us not, just as we are in the real world.

As for the special fate of the protagonist of Lovecraft's novel, his possession by his ancestor Joseph Curwen, a master of occult arts, is only a means to much larger ends that have been eons in the making. As previously imaged, he is just a configuration of atoms, not an ensouled creature of a god who has been toying with us for the past hundred thousand years more or less. Absolutely up-to-date—that is, post-*everything*—*The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* emerged from an imagination that was deferential to no traditions or dogmas, and its author went the distance of disillusionment in assuming the meaningless universe that became the starting point for later investigators in the sciences and philosophy. (Ask the Nobel Prize–winning physicist Steven Weinberg, who notoriously said, "The more we know about the universe, the more meaningless it appears.") Although Lovecraft did have his earthbound illusions, at the end of the day he existed in a no man's land of disillusionment. As a fiction writer, he will ever be a contemporary of each new generation of mortals, because there will always be many a character in the real world for whom human life is not acceptable.

Uncharacters

In many horror stories there is an assortment of figures that appear as walk-ons or extras whose purpose is to lend their spooky presence to a narrative for atmosphere alone, while the real bogey is something else altogether. Puppets, dolls, and other caricatures of the human often make cameo appearances as shapes sagging in the corner of a child's bedroom or lolling on the shelves of a toy store. There are also dismembered limbs and decapitated heads of manikins that have been relegated to spare parts strewn about an old warehouse where such things are stored or sent to die. As backdrops or bit-players, imitations of the human form have a symbolic value because they seem connected to another world, one that is all harm and disorder—the kind of place we

sometimes fear is the model for our own home ground, which we *must* believe is passably sound and secure, or at least not an environment where we might mistake a counterfeit person for the real thing. But in fiction, as in life, mistakes are sometimes made. When they are, one of those humanoid replicas may advance to the center of a story's action.

In E. T. A. Hoffmann's "The Sandman," for instance, the protagonist Nathanael discovers that the too perfect girl to whom he has proposed marriage is really just an automaton. This shakes him up so greatly that he is committed to an asylum until he recovers his senses. The incident with Nathanael's mechanical fiancée, a thing of parts who is the creation of two mysterious characters in the story, also shakes up others who are in love with dream girls. As Hoffmann's story goes, "Many lovers, to be quite convinced that they were not enamored of wooden dolls, would request their mistresses to sing and dance a little out of time, to embroider and knit, and play with their lapdogs, while listening to reading, etc., and, above all, not merely to listen, but also sometimes to talk in such a manner as presupposed actual thought and feeling." Toward the end of "The Sandman," Nathanael's madness returns, and he leaps to his death from a steeple after screaming "Turn and turn about, little doll."

There are many abominable fates in horror stories, and among them is that of Nathanael. Worse still is when a human being becomes objectified as a puppet, a doll, or some other caricature of our species and enters a world that he or she thought was just a creepy little place *inside* of ours. What a jolt to find oneself a prisoner in this sinister sphere, reduced to a composite mechanism looking out on the land of the human, or one which we believe to be human by any definition of the word, and to be exiled from it. Just as we know that dreams are merely reflections of what happens in our lives, we are also quite sure that puppets, dolls, and other caricatures of our species are only reflections of ourselves. In a sane world, no correspondence could exist between those artificial anatomies and our natural flesh. That would be too strange and awful, for things to become confused in such a way. More

strange and awful, of course, would be to find this a *living confusion*—life as the dream of a puppet.

Supernaturalism

When the narrator of Joseph Conrad's novel *Under Western Eyes* (1911) writes that "the belief in a supernatural source of evil is not necessary; men alone are quite capable of every wickedness," he seems to be speaking for the author, who shunned the supernatural in his fiction. Nevertheless, Conrad was a great depicter of what he felt was an ineffable deviltry that nests in the shadows of all that is. And any close reader of Conrad will perceive the impure breath of the supernatural in many of his works. In *Heart of Darkness* (1902), for example, he pulls at the collar of psychological realism, plying his genius for nuance and stealing up to the very border of supernaturalism. By proceeding thus, Conrad impresses upon his audience the consciousness of a horror that goes beyond the human and takes in all of being.

Conrad's odyssey into horror begins when the narrator of *Heart of Darkness,* Charles Marlow, acquires a position with a European business concern as the skipper of a steamboat. His first charge is to guide the vessel down a snaking African river to a remote outpost run by one the company's best men, Mr. Kurtz, a prolific supplier of goods to his employers. At every point, Marlow feels his journey is taking him farther and farther into an unholy land as he progresses toward his destination. Thus:

> Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine. The long stretches of the waterway ran on, deserted, into the gloom of overshadowed distances. On silvery sandbanks hippos and alligators sunned themselves side by side. The broadening waters flowed through a mob of wooded islands; you lost your way on that river as you would in a desert, and butted all day long against shoals, trying to find the channel, till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off for ever from everything you had known once—somewhere—far away—in another existence perhaps. There were moments when one's past came back to one, as it will sometimes when you have not a moment to spare to yourself; but it came in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream, remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities

> of this strange world of plants, and water, and silence. And this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect. I got used to it afterwards; I did not see it any more; I had no time. I had to keep guessing at the channel; I had to discern, mostly by inspiration, the signs of hidden banks; I watched for sunken stones; I was learning to clap my teeth smartly before my heart flew out, when I shaved by a fluke some infernal sly old snag that would have ripped the life out of the tin-pot steamboat and drowned all the pilgrims; I had to keep a look-out for the signs of dead wood we could cut up in the night for next day's steaming. When you have to attend to things of that sort, to the mere incidents of the surface, the reality—the reality, I tell you—fades. The inner truth is hidden—luckily, luckily. But I felt it all the same; I felt often its mysterious stillness watching me....

This passage substantiates that you do not need the supernatural to invoke the supernatural. Reality fades more and more as Marlow approaches Kurtz, who embodies the horrible "inner truth" of things. On the level of narrative, this inner truth is outwardly made plain by one look at Kurtz's base of operations, where the barbarous means of his successful career are visible everywhere. But Kurtz is not just a bestial headman managing a trading post in Africa. His whole meaning as a character is much more than that. What the brutally atavistic Kurtz signifies to Marlow surpasses the "wickedness of men" and deposits the steamboat captain on the threshold of an occult truth about the underpinnings of the only reality he has ever known—the anchoring fictions of civilization.

If Kurtz is simply a man who has realized his potential for wickedness—which, by inference, is a potential for each of us—then he is merely another candidate for incarceration or the death penalty. But if he is a man who has probed the mysteries of something that is wicked in its essence, then he has crossed the point of no return, and his last words—"The horror! The horror!"—have prodigious implications. Not to say that the assorted overtones that literary critics have heard in the story—civilization is only skin deep, European colonialism was a bad business—are not horrors. But they are not *the* horror that every incident of the narrative prefigures. In *Heart of Darkness,* Conrad did not cede "the horror" a local habitation and a name (example: *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*), but artfully suggested a malignity conjoining the

latent turpitude of human beings with that active in being itself.

As a species, we might have been saved both from our turpitude, latent or not, and from any notion of turpitude active in being itself. The real horror, the real tragedy, is that we were not saved. In an 1898 letter to the Scottish writer R. B. Cunninghame Graham, Conrad wrote:

> Yes, egoism is good, and altruism is good, and fidelity to *nature* would be the best of all … if we could only get rid of consciousness. What makes mankind tragic is not that they are the victims of *nature,* it is that they are conscious of it. To be part of the *animal kingdom* under the conditions of this earth is very well—but as soon as you know of your slavery, the pain, the anger, the strife—the tragedy begins. We can't return to nature, since we can't change our place in it. Our refuge is in stupidity … There is no morality, no knowledge, and no hope; there is only the *consciousness of ourselves* which drives us about a world that … is always but a vain and floating appearance. (Conrad's emphasis)

Too conscious that *Heart of Darkness* was not the place for such discourse, Conrad gave us Marlow's sensitivity to an "implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention" and Kurtz's resonant last words. If our species was not saved from consciousness, at least the above letter was saved so that we could know what horror was in Conrad's heart.

Some horror writers are not the least concerned with the wickedness of men but exclusively attend to an "implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention," which is to say, something pernicious behind the scenes of life that makes our lives a living nightmare. For Lovecraft, this all-embracing nightmare became the grounding for the supernaturalism of his writings, most famously in his negative mythology of multidimensional horrors sometimes collectively designated as the "Great Old Ones," who came to earth from other worlds, much like the Body Snatchers and the Thing. Their individual names alone, some of which were referenced earlier in this book, convey their otherworldly demonism. Here are some other names: Dagon, Yog-Sothoth, and Shub-Niggurath the Goat with a Thousand Young. Lovecraft also wrote of unnamed beings that may be apprehended only by

their sensory attributes, as with the eponymous entity in "The Colour out of Space" or the unobserved source of the "exquisitely low and infinitely distant musical note" that sounds in the blackness above the Rue d'Auseil in "The Music of Erich Zann."

In composing the latter work, Lovecraft came up with a model supernatural horror tale, one in which a subjective mind and an objective monstrosity shade into each other, the one projecting itself outward and the other reflecting back so that together they form the perfect couple dancing to the uncanny music of being. The mind in the story is that of the nervously afflicted narrator; the monstrosity is the unnamed and unnamable nemesis of the nervously afflicted Zann. With his viol-playing, Zann battles to keep at bay this *thing* that would destroy an already tumble-down world as represented by the Rue d'Auseil, the street on which he lives and where he dies. In "The Music of Erich Zann," Lovecraft offers no sanity or system of meaning. What he does offer are Zann's "weird notes," which correspond to powers of disorder that scoff at our fabricated world and show us the horror of our lives.

Belief in the supernatural is only superstition. That said, a *sense of the supernatural,* as Conrad evinced in *Heart of Darkness,* must be admitted if one's inclination is to go the limits of horror. It is the sense of what *should not be*—the sense of being ravaged by the impossible. Phenomenally speaking, the supernatural may be regarded as the metaphysical counterpart of insanity, a transcendental correlative of a mind that has been driven mad. This mind does not keep a chronicle of "man's inhumanity to man" but instead tracks a dysphoria symptomatic of our life as transients in a creation that is natural for all else that lives, but for us is anything but.

The most uncanny of creaturely traits, the sense of the supernatural, the impression of a fatal estrangement from the visible, is dependent on our consciousness, which merges the outward and the inward into a universal comedy without laughter. We are only chance visitants to this jungle of blind

mutations. The natural world existed when we did not, and it will continue to exist long after we are gone. The supernatural crept into life only when the door of consciousness was opened in our heads. The moment we stepped through that door, we walked out on nature. Say what we will about it and deny it till we die—we are blighted by our knowing what is too much to know and too secret to tell one another if we are to stride along our streets, work at our jobs, and sleep in our beds. It is the knowledge of a race of beings that is only passing through this shoddy cosmos.[2]

As explained in an earlier section of this work, literary use of the supernatural may strikingly differ among the works of diverse authors or even within the output of a single author. A noteworthy example of the latter case displays itself in a comparison of two of Shakespeare's greatest plays, *Hamlet* (c. 1600–1601) and *Macbeth* (c. 1606). In *Hamlet,* the supernatural element is extraneous; in *Macbeth,* it is integral. While both dramas are patterned along the lines of a soap opera—complete with squabbles, schemes, betrayals, and deceptions in a world on the make—*Macbeth* is played out within a supernatural order that is reinforced throughout the play and gives it a terrible mystery that *Hamlet* lacks. The latter work does have its ghost, but this apparition serves only as a dramatic device to get the plot moving, which could have been done without an otherworldly intervention that gives away the work's central secret from its commencement and in no sense tinctures the incidents of the play with a tenebrous and malefic presence, as is the case with *Macbeth.*

Without the three witches (a.k.a. Weird Sisters; Sisters of Fate), who officiate as masters of a power that reduces the characters of the drama to the status of puppets, *Macbeth* would not be *Macbeth.* Without the ghost of Hamlet, Sr., *Hamlet* would still be *Hamlet.* As we all know, later in the drama Hamlet the Younger doubts the words of his father's presumptive spirit and double-checks them by having a troupe of actors stage a number called *The Murder of Gonzago,* so that the indecisive protagonist can see for himself how the

new king, his uncle Claudius, responds to the play's reenactment of how he killed his brother. Hamlet needs earthly evidence, not just the words of a revenant, to confirm the crime. The play's the thing, not the ghost. It is just too much that after all the inside information thunderously told by the Hamlet the Elder in the first act, Hamlet the Younger would still feel the necessity to engage in his own detective work before making his move. Another set-up could have been used to point the finger at Claudius's nefarious deed—a snoop in the shrubbery perhaps—and the paternal shade could have been edited from the play. Along with this excision there would be lost a side issue of interest to Shakespeare scholars —to wit, the Bard's treatment of Catholicism's doctrine of Purgatory—but nothing apposite to the story would have gone missing. And the matter of whether or not the ghost is truly that of Hamlet's father or a lying goblin is not kept so much in the reader or playgoer's mind to be a source of great suspense and would have derailed the course of *Hamlet*'s plot had it turned out to be the latter. All told, Hamlet is not a work that gains anything considerable from a supernatural intrusion.

In both *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* there is a mass of majestic rhetoric by the title characters about the mysterious matters of human life. However, there is a dimension of the unknowable in *Macbeth* that situates us in a world of cosmic misrule outside the boundaries of the natural order. *Hamlet* is a tragedy of human errors; *Macbeth,* an uncanny puppet show. The springboard of the earlier play is, once more, the treacherous murder of Hamlet's father. That of the later piece is a malicious witchery in the world, an unbodied agency that tugs Macbeth through motions that accurse him and his wife as much as they do their victims. The play is a ferment of fatality. Every action is choreographed by a supernaturalism that deracinates its main characters from their natural drives to survive and reproduce and leads Macbeth to the revelation, among others, that "Life's but a walking shadow"—that death is the thing that makes us uncanny things that have nothing to do with the rest of creation. Hamlet has bad dreams, as do

we all. But Macbeth cannot dream. As contracted by fate, he has murdered sleep and knows only a waking nightmare.

Plot

In his *Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational* (1917), the German theologian Rudolf Otto writes of the "numinous," the wholly Other (that is, God), as a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* ("a terrifying and fascinating mystery"). Confrontations with the numinous are uncommon outside the lives of religious mystics, who may be terrified by their supernatural assignations but are never undone by them. For these extremist believers, the supernatural is a terror of the divine, not a demonic horror. And it is the absolute reality. After conjuring up the wholly Other through prayer and meditation, cultists of the sacred feel themselves to be nothing in its presence, only a bit of crud stuck to the shoe of the numinous. Eventually, so says Otto, they make common cause with the numinous and are able to feel good about themselves. On Otto's say-so, these are encounters with the supernatural in its truest and most encompassing sense; any others, including those evoked by supernatural horror stories, are primitive or perverted. What else could a theologian say? What other kind of supernatural story would he have to tell? While *The Idea of the Holy* has some electrifying moments when things are touch and go, the ending is all blessedness and no harm done. But this is not what readers expect when the supernatural is the featured element. They expect death, good or not so good, and will feel swindled if they do not get it. Because death is what really terrifies and fascinates them. In the midst of their lives, they are deep in death … and they know it. They do not know the numinous, which hangs back from life and welcomes very few into its circle. Why things should be this way is the real mystery.

The context of Otto's tract is the nature and origins of religion, a respectable fixation for scholars, divines, and anyone else who has a few coins to throw in the pot. But paranormal

researchers have written with as much conviction, investigative rigor, and personal experience about their own field of study; they, too, have tales to tell of the terrifying and fascinating, as if anyone could have a monopoly on these emotions or reserve their copyright for true believers only.[3] The supernatural is in the public domain, and, whatever the ontological angle, it is packaged with plots that are missing from the natural world. When we and our prototypes were part of that world, our lives had as little plot to them as the doings of earth's flora and fauna. Later, as our consciousness began to inflate, we strayed off from the natural. Our bodies stayed behind, but our minds searched for stories with better plots than just survival, reproduction, and death. However, these stories could not be set in the natural world, where there are no stories—where things just happen willy-nilly and events have no meaning outside of material practicality. These stories had to have plots at a distance from biology.

Say what we like, we do not believe ourselves to be just organisms. Ask any medical researcher in his home-sweet-home if he thinks of himself and his wife and kids in the same way he does the animals he left back in the lab. That we are *critters* is only a scientific technicality. What we see in our mirrors are human beings, and what we need in our diet is the sustenance of stories telling us that we are more than the sum of our creaturely parts. And our supply of this provender comes from only one source—our consciousness, which dramatizes survival as storied conflicts between everyone and his brother and tricks up procreation as legends of courtly love, bedroom farces, and romantic fictions with or without laughs.

But such narratives are not really very far from nature, as we can confirm for ourselves. Those recitals of physical or psychological strife among us: Are they really so removed from survival in the natural kingdom? No, they are not. They are still nature, red in tooth and claw. Masked by our consciousness and its illusions to seem uniquely human, our war stories, success stories, and other bio-dramas are not qualitatively different from their analogues in the wilderness. This

goes doubly for romance yarns, those dolled-up variations on mating rituals as seen in nature documentaries. They are not detached from the procreative dog-and-pony show as observed by zoologists and would be dramatically incomplete without a sexual union as their chief motive. Properly considered, they are an ornate pornography, with oft-repeated plots having their climax in a release of tension between two parties and their falling action in what cinematic pornographers term a "money shot," which in conventional filmic products is replaced by a kiss or a marriage by way of consummation.

As survivors and procreators, we unravel stories that at their root are not dissimilar from the habitual behaviors seen in nature. But as beings who know they will die we digress into episodes and epics that are altogether dissociated from the natural world. We may isolate this awareness, distract ourselves from it, anchor our minds far from its shores, and sublimate it as a motif in our sagas. Yet at no time and in no place are we protected from being tapped on the shoulder and reminded, "You're going to die, you know." However much we try to ignore it, our consciousness haunts us with this knowledge. Our heads were baptized in the font of death; they are doused with the horror of moribundity.

Death—do we really believe it is part of the order of our lives? We say that we do. But when it becomes lucent to our imagination, how natural does it *feel?* W. A. Mozart's attributed last words are apropos here: "The taste of death is on my tongue. I feel something which is not of this world" (quoted in Jacques Choron, *Death and Modern Man,* 1964). Death is not like survival and procreation. It is more like a visitation from a foreign and enigmatic sphere, one to which we are connected by our consciousness. No consciousness, no death. No death, no stories with a beginning, middle, and an end. Animal stories of survival and procreation have no comparable structure because animals have no consciousness of death.

Obviously, not all fictional plots end in death, only those which follow a character's life until it can be followed no

more. However, in the world of nonfiction where we are making a go of it on our own, we know how far we will be followed. What we can never know is How and When the following will end. But suppose we did know How and When the ending would take place? What then? How could we go on? Who could *live* through a story whose ending he or she knew from page one—not in a general sense but as to the How and When of that ending, which may be a crucifixion and not an easeful cessation? Only because we do not know How or When our life story will finish can we keep going. We remain in suspense about these details, making it possible for us to follow attentively the twists and turns of our personal plot. And so the story holds our interest for as long as it lasts.

Yet everyone knows *What* is going to happen at the end. We just do not know what it will be like when what is going to happen actually happens. One would think that would be enough to ruin the story, knowing *What* is going to happen—that no one is going to make it through. Somehow, though, it does not. Our crafty minds have taken care of that. They have thought a thousand different endings, most prominently that of dying in one's sleep, or not thought about the ending at all. But when it comes, it comes. Nothing will turn away that distinguished visitor. After being long refused admittance into our lives, death materializes outside our door and begins pounding to be let in. Now everything quivers with an aura of the uncanny, and nameless shapes begin to form. As the end nears, consciousness surges and the pieces fall together. Being alive is all right, or so most of us say. But when death walks through the door, nothing is all right. As some believe that life is that which *should not be,* the bulk of the rest of us believe the same of death. That is its terror and its fascination. Everyone knows that we are all the dead-to-be. There are gewgaws and knick-knacks that stay in shape far longer than our mortal forms. If we called ourselves dead from the time we are born, we would not be far off from the truth. But as long as we can walk or crawl or just lie abed sucking tubes, we can still say that being alive is all right.

Without death—meaning without our consciousness of death—no story of supernatural horror would ever have been written, nor would any other artistic representation of human life have been created for that matter. It is always there, if only between the lines or brushstrokes, or conspicuously by its absence. It is a terrific stimulus to that which is at once one of our greatest weapons and greatest weaknesses—imagination. Our minds are always on the verge of exploding with thoughts and images as we ceaselessly pound the pavement of our world. Both our most exquisite cogitations and our worst cognitive drivel announce our primal torment: We cannot linger in the stillness of nature's vacuity. And so we have imagination to beguile us. A misbegotten hatchling of consciousness, a birth defect of our species, imagination is often revered as a sign of vigor in our make-up. But it is really just a psychic overcompensation for our impotence as beings. Denied nature's exemption from creativity, we are indentured servants of the imaginary until the hour of our death, when the final harassments of imagination will beset us.

Apart from vulgar mortality, supernatural literature also centers on the death of sanity, identity, ideals, abilities, passions, and hand-me-down conceptions about the universe and everything in it. Death is accepted in horror stories because a plot that did not ignite its terrors—in a fictional world, that is—would be a narrative miscarriage. But in real life few of us hang out in morgues and mausoleum chambers, and even those who do are only perversely inuring themselves to the graphic details of what puts us in these places. Being alive is supposed to be all right, but not when you have *no choice* but to consider the alternative. An example of how this might happen, one with which most of us are conversant, is the prosaic plot of a vehicular misadventure, a mischance that is ordinarily experienced as a dreamlike ramble with unforeseen stops along the way.

Imagine: You may be traveling on a slippery road when, without warning, your vehicle begins sliding across several lanes of oncoming traffic. You know that such things happen. They may even have happened to you on a prior occasion.

You know that they happen to other people all the time. Nevertheless, this accident was not in your plans, which is why it is called an accident. In principle, it could be plotted as a cause-and-effect confluence of circumstances, although you would never be able to trace them to their originating source, not even if you went back to the beginning of time. It might occur to you, though, that the responsibility for your accident-to-come lay with a friend or relative who called and asked you to come over and lend a hand in some fix-it project, because you would not even be out of the house except for that untimely request. Yet you would be just as right to hold other factors responsible: the slippery road on which you were driving, the weather that made the road slippery, all the things that determined the weather, the length of time you spent looking in your clothes closet for the shoes that would be most proper to wear for the fix-it project in question—that interval of perfect extent which made sure you would be just where you needed to be so that you would not be too early or too late to become involved in a vehicular misadventure.

But whatever the proximate or remote causes of your vehicular misadventure might have been, you had an idea of how things were to happen that day, as you do every day, and spinning out of control in your car while other vehicles try to circumvent a collision with you was not on your schedule. One second ago you had a firm grip on things, but now you are veering toward who knows where. You are not filled with horror, not yet, as you careen along the pavement that is slick with rain or snow glistening in the moonlight, the wind wailing and shadows scattering. At this point everything is all strangeness. You have been taken to a different place from where you were just a moment before.

Then it begins. *This can't be happening,* you think—if you can think at all, if you are anything more than a whirlwind of panic. In reality, though, anything can happen now. This is the whispering undercurrent that creeps into your thoughts—nothing is safe and nothing is off limits. All of a sudden something was set in motion that changed everything. Something descended upon you that had been circling above your

life from the day you were born. And for the first time you feel that which you have never felt before—the imminence of your own death. There is no possibility for self-deception now. The paradox that came with consciousness is done with. Only horror is left. This is what is real. This is the only thing that was ever real, however unreal it may have seemed. Of course, bad things happen, as everyone knows. They have always happened and always will happen. They are part of the natural order of things. But this is not how we would have it. This is not how we think things should be for us. This is how we think things should *not* be. And all supernatural horror, as we remember, obtains in what we believe should be and should not be.

Yet might we have avoided this horror by warding off our belief in what should be and what should not be, by believing only in what is? No, we could not. We were doomed to hold this belief and to suffer what looms out of it. What doomed us (if one will forgive another imperious repetition of this theme) was consciousness—parent of all horrors and author of all we believe should be and should not be. While consciousness brought us out of our coma in the natural, we still like to think that, however aloof we are from other living things, we are not in essence wholly alienated from them. We do try to fit in with the rest of creation, living and breeding like any other animal or vegetable. It is no fault of ours that we were made as we were made—experiments in a parallel being. This was not our choice. We did not volunteer to be as we are. We may think that being alive is all right, especially when we consider the alternative, but we think about it as infrequently as possible, for this very thought raises the spirits of the dead and all the other freaks of nature.

No other life forms know they are alive, and neither do they know they will die. This is our curse alone. Without this hex upon our heads, we would never have withdrawn as far as we have from the natural—so far and for such a time that it is a relief to say what we have been trying with our all not to say: *We have long since been denizens of the natural world.* Everywhere around us are natural habitats, but within us is the

shiver of startling and dreadful things. Simply put: *We are not from here.* If we vanished tomorrow, no organism on this planet would miss us. Nothing in nature needs us. We are like Mainländer's suicidal God. Nothing needed Him either, and His uselessness was transferred to us after He burst out of existence. We have no business being in this world. We move among living things, all those natural puppets with nothing in their heads. But our heads are in another place, a world apart where all the puppets exist not in the midst of life but outside it. We are those puppets, those *human* puppets. We are crazed mimics of the natural prowling about for a peace that will never be ours. And the medium in which we circulate is that of the supernatural, a dusky element of horror that obtains for those who believe in what should be and should not be. This is our secret quarter. This is where we rave with insanity on the level of metaphysics, fracturing reality and breaking the laws of life.

Deviations from the natural have whirled around us all our days. We kept them at arm's length, abnormalities we denied were elemental to our being. But absent us there is nothing of the supernatural in the universe. We are aberrations—beings born undead, neither one thing nor another, or two things at once … uncanny things that have nothing to do with the rest of creation, horrors that poison the world by sowing our madness everywhere we go, glutting daylight and darkness with incorporeal obscenities. From across an immeasurable divide, we brought the supernatural into all that is manifest. Like a faint haze it floats around us. We keep company with ghosts. Their graves are marked in our minds, and they will never be disinterred from the cemeteries of our remembrance. Our heartbeats are numbered, our steps counted. Even as we survive and reproduce, we know ourselves to be dying in a dark corner of infinity. Wherever we go, we know not what expects our arrival but only that it is there.

With eyes that see through a translucent veil shimmering before us, we look at life from the other side. There, something escorts us through our days and nights like a second shadow that casts itself into another world and fastens us to

it. Leashed to the supernatural, we know its signs and try to tame them by desensitization and lampoonery. We study them as symbols, play games with them. Then an eerily hued light bathes them, and they become real once more: the grinning skull, the curving scythe, the moldy headstone, all the dark creatures of the earth and air, all the momenti mori we have hidden within us. These skeletons of ours—when will they come out and show themselves? They groan more loudly with each passing year. Time breezes by with chilling haste. Is the child in that old photograph really an erstwhile version of you, your little hand waving farewell? The face of that child is nothing like the face you have now. That child's face is now melding with the blackness behind you, before you, around you. The child is waving and smiling and fading as your car keeps skidding toward your abruptly curtailed future. Bye-bye.

Then another face appears. It has displaced the one you are used to seeing when your rearview mirror goes crooked, as it has now, and confronts you. You cannot look away, because the other face is lit up like a full moon, which both terrifies and fascinates you. And nothing about it looks natural. It seems rigid—the face of something that belongs in a toy chest. The face is smiling, but too much and too long to be real. And its eyes do not blink. The scene shifts moment by moment. People, places, and things appear and disappear. You appeared as others expected *but not as you chose.* You will disappear as if you had never been, having taken your turn in this world. You always told yourself that this was the natural way of things and that you could submit to it because you belonged to nature … MALIGNANTLY USELESS nature, which coughed you up like a little phlegm from its great lungs. Yet the supernatural has cleaved to you from the beginning, working its oddities into your life while you waited for death to begin beating on your door. It has not come to save you, but to bring you into its horror. Perhaps you hoped to make it through this horror that sat like a gargoyle upon your life. Now you find there is no way through. Only seconds are left, each one strangling you a little more tightly. Incantations are

spoken all around. They have lost their power. The living and the dead jabber inside you. You cannot understand them. Dreams become more lustrous than memories. Darkness is shoveled over dreams.

Those unblinking eyes are still gleaming in the mirror, the eyes of that face, smiling too much and too long. And you can feel your own face smiling, too, your eyes not blinking. Now that secret you never wanted to know comes into your head —that you were made as you were made and manipulated to behave as you behaved. And as this secret comes into your head, the smile of that face in the mirror pushes up at its edges. So does yours, doing as it is bidden. Both faces at once are smiling the same smile. It widens past all sane proportion. At last a long-restrained voice cries out: *What is this life!* But only silence answers, and it mocks every mad hope you ever held.

No self now, consciously speaking.

No feeling your old self or new self, false imaginings if you think about it, self-conscious nothings everywhere you look.

No one to hear you weep or scream, making a go of it on your own, bye-bye.

No bosom of nature, abandoned on the doorstep of the supernatural, minds full of flagrantly joyless possibilities, a real blunder that was, the human tragedy.

No reality to speak of, nobody here but us puppets, contradictory beings, mutants who embody the contorted logic of a paradox.

No immortality, ordinary folk and average mortals coming and going, can't stay long, got an appointment with nonexistence, no alternative to consider, being alive was all right while it lasted, so they say.

No life story with a happy ending to tell, only a contrivance of horror, then nothingness—and nothing else.

No Free Will-to-live, no redemption by a Will-to-die, how depressing.

No philosophies to peddle, pessimism a no-sale, optimism had to close its doors, too wicked to pass code.

No meanings or mind-games, repressional mechanisms broke down, self-deception shuttered its windows.

No awakening from a dream within a dream, mutation of consciousness—parent of all horrors, best not mess with it, extinction looking better all the time.

No more pleasure, what there was of it, a few crumbs left by chaos at feast, still a good supply of pain, though.

No praiseworthy incentives, just bowel-movement pressures, potato-mashing relativism.

No euthanasia, bad for the business of life, you're on your own there, but watch out for the eternal return, most horrible idea in the universe.

No loving God, omnipotence off duty and omniscience on leave, the deity He dead—the horror, the horror, even the skies of spring and the flowers of summer must ever afterward be poison, blame it on the piecing together of dissociated knowledge.

No compassionate Buddha, Body Snatchers got him, heard tell, or some kind of thing, maybe next lifetime.

No Good-versus-Evil formulas around here, Azathoth running the show, human beings a mistake or a joke, something pernicious making a nightmare of our world.

No being normal and real, the uncanny coming at you full speed, startling and dreadful.

No ego-death—enlightenment by accident.

No way out of harm's way, better never to have been, worst saved for last.

No Last Messiah, buried in the fingernails of midwives and pacifier makers, gone the way of messiahs past.

No bleakness either, a failure indeed.

No terror management by isolation, anchoring, distraction, sublimation.

No tragedies to read or to write, death kept at a safe distance past the vanishing point down the road.

No escape routes into a useless bliss, useless existence, malignantly so…

What now? Now there is only that unnaturally spreading smile—a great gaping abyss where blackness reaches out to blackness, nothing. Then: the sense of being swallowed. The story is done; the plot complete.

Endgame

To contest Zapffe's philosophy, or any philosophy like it, would be as facile as to contest that of any other philosopher whose reasoning does not suit your predilections. If his analysis of human existence appears secure in a certain light, it may be flouted with little exertion by anyone thus motivated. Zapffe did not discover the New World, with a handful of dirt to prove it. He was someone who thought he had worked out why humankind should go extinct, knowing that we would never make that choice, whatever he and his Last Messiah had to say. Whether we are sovereign or enslaved in our being, what of it? Our species will still look to the future and see no need to abdicate its puppet dance of replication in a puppet universe where the strings pull themselves. What a laugh that we would do anything else, or could do anything else. That our lives might be a paradox and a horror would not really be a secret too terrible to know for minds that know only what they want to know. The hell of human consciousness is only a philosopher's bedtime story we can hear each night and forget each morning when we awake to go to school or to work or wherever we may go day after day after day. What do we care about the horror of being insufferably aware we are alive and will die … the horror of shadows without selves enshrouding the earth … or the horror of puppet-heads bobbing in the wind and disappearing into a dark sky like lost balloons? If that is the way you think things are, go shout it from the rooftops and see where it gets you. We are staying put, but you can go extinct if you like. We can make more little puppets like you, but we do not call them that. We call them people who have indivisible selves and stories that are nothing like yours.

Being somebody is rough, but being nobody is out of the question. We must be happy, we must imagine Sisyphus to be

happy, we must believe because it is absurd to believe. Day by day, in every way, we are getting better and better. Positive illusions for positive persons. They shoot horses, don't they? But as for shooting ourselves—ask Gloria Beatty, ask Michelstaedter, ask Weininger, ask Hemingway. But do not ask Mainländer or Bjørneboe, who hanged themselves. And do not ask Jean Améry, author of *Suicide: A Discourse on Voluntary Death* (1976), who made his exit with a drug overdose. Améry survived Auschwitz, but he did not survive his survival. No one does. With our progenitors and the world behind us, we will never hold this life to be MALIGNANTLY USELESS. Almost nobody declares that an ancestral curse contaminates us in utero and pollutes our existence. Doctors do not weep in the delivery room, or not often. They do not lower their heads and say, "The stopwatch has started." The infant may cry, if things went right. But time will dry its eyes; time will take care of it. Time will take care of everyone until there are none of us to take care of. Then all will be as it was before we put down roots where we do not belong.

There will come a day for each of us—and then for all of us—when the future will be done with. Until then, humanity will acclimate itself to every new horror that comes knocking, as it has done from the very beginning. It will go on and on until it stops. And the horror will go on, with generations falling into the future like so many bodies into open graves. The horror handed down to us will be handed down to others like a scandalous heirloom. Being alive: decades of waking up on time, then trudging through another round of moods, sensations, thoughts, cravings—the complete gamut of agitations—and finally flopping into bed to sweat in the pitch of dead sleep or simmer in the phantasmagorias that molest our dreaming minds. Why do so many of us bargain for a life sentence over the end of a rope or the muzzle of a gun? Do we not *deserve* to die? But we are not obsessed by such questions. To ask them is not in our interest, nor to answer them with hand on heart. In such spirit might we not bring to an end the conspiracy against the human race? This would seem to

be the right course: the death of tragedy in the arms of nonexistence. Overpopulated worlds of the unborn would not have to suffer for our undoing what we have done so that we might go on as we have all these years. That said, nothing we know would have us take that step. What could be more unthinkable? We are only human beings. Ask anybody.

Notes

The Nightmare of Being

1. The nativity of human consciousness as depicted in this paragraph may be seen as (1) a fable of humanity's "loss of innocence" and alienation from a "natural" way of being in the world; (2) a speculative moment with a loose footing in evolutionary psychology.

2. "The Last Messiah," *Wisdom in the Open Air: The Norwegian Roots of Deep Ecology* (1993), ed. Peter Reed and David Rothenberg (translators Sigmund Kvaløy with Peter Reed); *Philosophy Now,* March–April 2004 (translator Gisle R. Tangenes). Regrettably, Zapffe's philosophical masterwork, *On the Tragic* (1941), has not appeared in any major language at the time of this writing. However, abstracts of its substance, as well as excerpts from this treatise and other writings by Zapffe as translated into English by Tangenes, confirm that throughout his long life he did not abandon or dilute the pessimistic principles of *On the Tragic* as they appear in miniature in "The Last Messiah." While it may seem strange or ludicrous for any book to place so much of the weight of its discourse on a short essay written by an obscure European philosopher in the early 1930s, one must start somewhere.

3. Under the collective designation of "constructivists," philosophers, sociologists, and other authorities working in a range of fields have variously deliberated on the fabricated nature of our lives. Examples: P. L. Berger and T. Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality,* 1966; Paul Watzlawick, ed., *Invented Reality: How Do We Know What We Believe We Know?,* 1984; Ernst von Glasefeld, *Radical Contructivism: A Way of Learning,* 1996. For book-reading intellectuals, this idea is just one of many that fill their days. Its import, however, is not often shared with the masses. But sometimes it is. An instance in cinema where fabrication is hypothesized to be the cornerstone of our

lives occurs at the end of *Hero* (1992), when the character referred to in the title, Bernard LePlant, passes on some words of wisdom to his previously estranged son. "You remember where I said I was going to explain about life, buddy?" he says. "Well, the thing about life is, it gets weird. People are always talking to you about truth, everybody always knows what the truth is, like it was toilet paper or something and they got a supply in the closet. But what you learn as you get older is, there ain't no truth. All there is, is bullshit. Pardon my vulgarity here. Layers of it. One layer of bullshit on top of another. And what you do in life, like when you get older, is—you pick the layer of bullshit you prefer, and that's your bullshit, so to speak. You got that?" Despite the cynicism of LePlant's words, the object of his fatherly lesson is to create a bond between him and his son. (Hollywood is heavily invested in plotlines in which a broken family is "healed.") This bond is reliant on the exposure of life as bullshit and is itself bullshit—since one can have no basis for preferring one layer of bullshit over another without already being full of bullshit—which makes LePlant's case that "All there is, is bullshit" without his being aware of it, which is how bullshit works. This is not the message the moviegoer is meant to take away from the mass-audience philosophizing of *Hero,* but there it is anyway.

4. It was also no impediment to Weininger's posthumous reputation—after he killed himself by gunshot at the age of twenty-three—that he was an anti-Semitic Jew who converted to Christianity, a life-path that looked good on one's resume before the Second World War, and one that will always look good to the average evangelical until Judgment Day. (Naturally, Weininger's works have been widely translated and critically examined.) The libelous profile of Jews in *Sex and Character* must have filled someone like Adolf Hitler with a self-satisfied sense of being a real human and not a Jew, even a converted one. In regard to the Führer's own reputation, what we have is

a biography of a bungler whose genocidal predisposition did not cause the way of life of his target group to falter. This is quite in contrast to the U.S. government's expertise in reducing indigenous peoples to internees on their own home ground and freely claiming their land. What they were is gone forever. To thwart suspicions to the contrary, the intent here is not to sympathize with any person or people but only to play up historical facts that live most vividly in the memory of their victims and must be repressed in the conscience of their perpetrators if the latter are to retain a good opinion of themselves, their god, their nation, their families, and the human race, or that part of the human race with whom they believe themselves to share a destiny. Such facts of life and death are just that—facts. To the extent they are submitted as an indictment of humanity, a blunder has been made. What has been called "man's inhumanity to man" should not entice us into a misanthropy smarting for our species to come to an end. That deduction is another blunder, as much as it would be a blunder to tub-thump for our survival based on the real abundance of what is valued as "humane" behavior. Both the "inhuman" and the "humane" movements of our species are without relevance. None of us are at the helm of either of these movements. We believe ourselves to be masters of our behavior—that is the blunder. We believe ourselves to be something we are not—that is the blunder. To perpetuate these blunders, to conspire in the suffering of future generations, is the only misconduct to be expiated, not that we will ever be ready or able to rectify our incorrigible nature. That we were naturally or divinely made to collaborate in our own suffering and that of human posterity is the blunder. Ask Adam and Eve, symbols of the most deleterious blunder of all, one which we reenact every day.

5. For a study that reaches the conclusion that one's subjective well-being is approximately fifty percent determined by genetic lottery and fifty percent by life experi-

ences, rather than something that a self-help book can instruct an individual to achieve, see "Happiness Is a Stochastic Phenomenon" by David Lykken and Auke Tellegen, *University of Minnesota Psychological Science,* 1996. The equal percentages of genetic and experiential factors in Lykken and Tellegen's study results in their conclusion that happiness is a "matter of chance" and is not a phenomenon genetically determined in whole. A full genetic determinism of one's happiness, and every other trait of ours, is known as "puppet determinism," although why genetics should be the lone string-puller and not genetics coupled with events in one's existence, which would leave nothing of what we are to chance, seems curious. (For more on determinism, see the section *Actors* in the chapter "Who Goes There?")

6. The précis of Mainländer's philosophy in this chapter in based in several sources: Thomas Whittaker's *Essays and Notices Philosophical and Psychological,* 1895; H. P. Blavatsky's "The Origin of Evil" in the October 1897 issue of the journal *Lucifer;* Rudolph Steiner's *The Riddles of Philosophy,* 1914, and *Evil: Selected Lectures,* 1918; Radoslav Tsanoff's *The Nature of Evil,* 1931; Francesca Arundale's *The Idea of Rebirth,* 1942; Aleksander Samarin, "The Engima of Immortality," May 2005 (http://www.thebigview.com); Johann Joachim Gestering's *German Pessimism and Indian Philosophy: A Hermenuetic Reading,* 1986; and Henry Sheldon's *Unbelief in the Nineteenth Century,* 2005. A more conventionally philosophical working out of why the human race should be discontinued is contained in the section *Undoing III* later in this chapter.

7. Zapffe's solution to nature's sportive minting of the human race may seem the last checkpoint of pessimism. In his *Philosophy of the Unconscious* (1869), the German philosopher Eduard von Hartmann thinks farther ahead: "What would it avail, *e.g.,* if all mankind should die out by sexual continence? The world as such would continue to exist." This endurance of the organic would allow the

restive forces of life to set up "*a new man or similar type,* and the whole misery would begin over again" (Hartmann's emphasis). For Hartmann, the struggle for deliverance will not end until a super-potent force exterminates every scintilla of the Creation. While Hartmann's vision is lunacy, so is the idea that humanity will ever leave off breeding. Between two uproarious implausibilities, why distinguish one as more implausible than another?

8. The notion that human beings are caught in a paradox that affects no other creatures in this world reemerges in John Gray's *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (2002). At the end of this work, the author echoes Zapffe's conceptualization of humanity when he writes: "Other animals do not need a purpose in life. A contradiction to itself, the human animal cannot do without one." While observing this contradiction, however, Gray never gives a moment's regard to the possibility that it might render human existence a paradox that only voluntary extinction can bring to an end. Even though Gray sees our involuntary extinction as probable and not far off, he is still open to solutions short of the cooperative cessation of the human race. The one that he suggests, which he seems not to have noticed is already in place, is that humanity should do what it can to get by in this world while living in a state of irremediable delusion. Following the previously quoted sentences is the parting sentiment of *Straw Dogs:* "Can we not think of the aim of life as being simply to see?" This query rests on the premise that there is a better way for the human race to live, and that we could live that way if we wanted to. Irrespective of the optimistic spirit of Gray's concluding question, *Straw Dogs* has been deprecated by many as a breviary of pessimism. Without cavil, it is a contrarian work that has rejuvenated for the common reader some of the most basic and neglected difficulties of human life. But to label it as pessimistic is an overreaction on the

part of those who would remain mere dabblers in actuality.

9. For a supporting view of James's non-logical exoneration of the faithful, see Suckiel, Ellen Kappy, "William James on Cognitivity of Feelings, Religious Pessimism, and the Meaning of Life," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy,* 2004.

10. Included among these works are Herbert Fingarette's *Self-Deception* (2000), Alfred R. Mele's *Self-Deception Unmasked* (2001); Eviatar Zerubavel's *The Elephant in the Room: Silence and Denial in Everyday Life* (2006); *Perspectives on Self-Deception* (1988), Brian P. McLaughlin and Amelie Oksenburg Rorty, eds.; *Denial: A Clarification of Concepts and Research* (1989), E. L. Edelstein, D. L. Nathanson, and A. M. Stone, eds.; and *Lying and Deception in Everyday Life* (1993), Michael Lewis and Carolyn Saarni, eds.

Who Goes There?

1. Galen Strawson explains this experience is similar terms: For most people, "their personality is something that is unnoticed, and in effect undetectable in the present moment. It's what they look through, or where they look from; not something they look at; a global and invisible condition of their life, like air, not an object of experience" ("The Sense of Self" in *From Soul to Self,* ed. M. James C. Crabbe, 1999).

Freaks of Salvation

1. One's "sense of meaning" functions as an autonomic system, something that is noticed when it goes on the fritz but not when it is in working order. It is part of the cog-and-wheel functioning of our psychological machinery and would perhaps be better characterized as a set of stored-up assumptions than a sensation or emotion. When one or more of these assumptions is threatened by someone or something, their meaning-system will come to the fore and face off with its foe.

After the threat is dealt with, this system once again returns to its autonomic functioning. Only a tiny percentage of humans consciously fixate on meaning without an adversarial provocation. If for most of our race meaning comes straight from a handbook that may be referenced by page and paragraph, chapter and verse—"God exists," "I have a Self," "My country is the best in the world"—for this small percentage meaning is principally received from one source: a *sense of mystery.* In his essay "The Wall and the Book," the twentieth-century Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges wrote: "Music, states of happiness, mythology, faces belabored by time, certain twilights and certain places try to tell us something, or have said something we should not have missed, or are about to say something; *this imminence of a revelation which does not occur* is, perhaps, the aesthetic phenomenon" (emphasis added). Lovecraft's "Notes on the Writing of Weird Fiction" opens with this sentence: "My reason for writing stories is to give myself the satisfaction of visualising more clearly and detailedly and stably the vague, elusive, fragmentary impressions of wonder, beauty, and *adventurous expectancy* which are conveyed to me by certain sights (scenic, architectural, atmospheric, etc.), ideas, occurrences, and images encountered in art and literature" (emphasis added). This sense of mystery that is never dissipated by express knowledge but is forever an *imminence* or *expectancy* explains much of the attraction of supernatural stories (Blackwood's "The Willows," Lovecraft's "The Colour out of Space," Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher.") For Borges and Lovecraft, the experience that a meaningful mystery was *about* to be revealed to them was stirred by works of art or by an aesthetic vision of things in the world. For others, the experience of meaning through mystery may not take place because of a crudeness of character or a mystery-killing condition such as depression, a disease that trumps everything that might mean something. But when a sense of mystery arises, it does so most potently on the threshold of

realization. Should the mystery ever be revealed, it will crumble and lie in pieces upon the earth. Afterward, there will be an incursion of scriptures, doctrines, and narratives that specify the mysterious as an object, a datum. To say that some kind of god *might* exist is to vivify its being with mystery. To define a god into existence because it meets certain criteria for godhood is to kill that god by turning it into a cheapjack idol with a publicity team of theologians behind it. This would explain why so many deities—all of them, in fact—have fallen apart or are in the process of doing so: eventually every god loses its mystery because it has become overqualified for its job. After a god's mystery is gone, arguments for its reality begin. Logic steps in to resuscitate what has been bled of its healthful vagueness. Finally, another "living god" is consigned to the mortuary of scholars.

2. Borges's essay "The Doctrine of Cycles" both cites and conceives several refutations catastrophic for the ancient concept of the eternal return, which posits the identical recurrence of all beings and events forever and ever and ever. In the words of the bookish Argentine, the "eternal return of the same" is "the most horrible idea in the universe." To Borges, this idea was a nightmare born of bad philosophy; to Nietzsche, it was a nightmare fathered by his need to be joyful, or to believe he would be joyful no matter what horror befell him. In Nietzsche's world, coming to terms with this idea *as a reality* was a must for affirming one's life and life itself, thus recalculating the horrors of existence into a fate, or an unceasing series of fates, that would somehow inspire love rather than alarm. Given the antinomy on this issue between Borges and Nietzsche, should one writer be heralded over the other as genuine, authentic, or whatever term of approval one cares to wield? This is a moot question. Each man was handling the stress of a hyper-diligent consciousness in his own style and not in one pressed upon him by cognitive meddlers.

3. How vapid is the rhetoric of insolence when used by infidels. Only the blasphemies of the faithful who feel themselves ill-used by their deity carry the music of hatred that the unbeliever attempts in vain. Take the Book of Job. Were its protagonist an actual man and not a lesson in fearful obeisance, the Old Testament might contain a symphony of rancor greater than any this world has known. But Job turns legalistic rather than abusive; he wants to *argue* why he should be spared his hellish trials. No good can come of that. Any argument can go on interminably … or until one party gives in, which is what Job does because God will not argue with him and, being almighty, can say and do whatever he likes without question. One thing that Job's tale has conferred upon worshippers down through the ages is a compulsory workout in rationalization known as theodicy—a genre of Christian apologetics that endeavors to square an all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-loving god with the evils of existence. *Pace* Chesterton, reconciling a good Creator with a bad creation makes for a problem that believers cannot solve with or without logic. And anyone who believes this problem will ever go away will believe anything.

4. Some quotes from U. G. may be useful here. The likeness between U. G.'s contentions and those of Zapffe, as well as to others made or to be made by the author of the present work, are fairly blatant. Because of these conceptual affinities, skepticism regarding the experiences and ideas of U. G. and others in this section is wanting, for whatever fosters insights we are eager to dispense is always given a shameful leeway. But as U. G. once said, "All insights, however extraordinary they may be, are worthless. You can create a tremendous structure of thought from your own discovery, which you call insight. But that insight is nothing but the result of your own thinking, the permutations and combinations of thought. Actually there is no way you can come up with anything

original." The following selection is taken from interviews with U. G. collected as *No Way Out* (1991).

The problem is this: Nature has assembled all these species on this planet. The human species is no more important than any other species on this planet. For some reason, man accorded himself a superior place in this scheme of things. He thinks that he is created for some grander purpose than, if I could give a crude example, the mosquito that is sucking his blood. What is responsible for this is the value system that we have created. And the value system has come out of the religious thinking of man. Man has created religion because it gives him a cover. This demand to fulfill himself, to seek something out there was made imperative because of this self-consciousness in you which occurred somewhere along the line of the evolutionary process. Man separated himself from the totality of nature.

* * *

Nature is interested in only two things—to survive and to reproduce one like itself. Anything you superimpose on that, all the cultural input, is responsible for the boredom of man. So we have varieties of religious experience. You are not satisfied with your own religious teachings or games; so you bring in others from India, Asia or China. They become interesting because they are something new. You pick up a new language and try to speak it and use it to feel more important. But basically, it is the same thing.

* * *

Somewhere along the line in human consciousness, there occurred self-consciousness. (When I use the word "self," I don't mean that there is a self or a center there.) That consciousness separated man from the totality of things. Man, in the beginning, was a frightened being. He turned everything that was uncontrollable into something divine or cosmic and worshiped it. It was in that frame of

mind that he created, quote and unquote, "God." So, culture is responsible for whatever you are. I maintain that all the political institutions and ideologies we have today are the outgrowth of the same religious thinking of man. The spiritual teachers are in a way responsible for the tragedy of mankind.

* * *

Your own death, or the death of your near and dear ones, is not something you can experience. What you actually experience is the void created by the disappearance of another individual, and the unsatisfied demand to maintain the continuity of your relationship with that person for a nonexistent eternity. The arena for the continuation of all these "permanent" relationships is the tomorrow—heaven, next life, and so on. These things are the inventions of a mind interested only in its undisturbed, permanent continuity in a "self"-generated, fictitious future. The basic method of maintaining the continuity is the repetition of the question, "How? How? How?" "How am I to live? How can I be happy? How can I be sure I will be happy tomorrow?" This has made life an insoluble dilemma for us. We want to know, and through that knowledge we hope to continue on with our miserable existences forever.

* * *

I still maintain that it is not love, compassion, humanism, or brotherly sentiments that will save mankind. No, not at all. It is the sheer terror of extinction that can save us, if anything can.

* * *

I am like a puppet sitting here. It's not just I; all of us are puppets. Nature is pulling the strings, but we believe that we are acting. If you function that way [as puppets], then the problems are simple. But we have superimposed on that [the idea of] a "person" who is pulling those strings.

5. Ask Charles Whitman, who left a written request that an autopsy be done on him that might explain why he ascended a tower at the University of Texas to shoot at and kill strangers before he himself was shot and killed by policemen. Whitman did have a brain tumor, but neurologists could not connect this malignancy to his actions, possibly because he was dead. In a note written a few days preceding his murderous rampage on August 1, 1966, Whitman stated that in March of that year he had consulted with one Dr. Jan Cochrum, to whom he confided his "unusual and irrational thoughts" and "overwhelming violent impulses." Cochrum gave Whitman a script for Valium and referred him to a psychiatrist, Dr. Maurice Dean Heatly. In his one session with Heatly, Whitman said that he had an urge to "start shooting people with a deer rifle." While no causal association was established between Whitman's brain tumor and his bloody actions, he probably should have had his brain checked out sooner, or at least "chosen" not to destroy so many lives. In a determinist court of justice, perhaps Cochrum and Heatly would have been tried as collaborators in the killings. But why be solicitous about such legal intricacies when the law could put it all on Whitman's head?

Sick to Death

1. At this point in his life, Tolstoy was running low on each of Zapffe's four methods for befogging one's consciousness—isolation, distraction, anchoring, and, most toweringly, sublimation through his work as a literary artist. As Zapffe may have borrowed some of his central propositions from Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy,* he may also have gone to school on Tolstoy's *A Confession.* In naming the self-deceitful ways of human beings, original ideas are hard to come by. Zapffe's thought in "The Last Messiah" is indeed based on "taboo commonplaces" and "outlawed truisms," which average mortals may not like

to hear about but which they cannot rebuff when they hear about them.

2. A cinematic exemplification of this betrayal is the closing voiceover of *Se7en* (1995), which was indeed a work of dark vision in which chaos triumphs over order until, at the last minute, the actor Morgan Freeman saves the day with a laconic voiceover: "Ernest Hemingway once wrote, 'The world is a fine place and worth fighting for.' I agree with the second part." This quote is taken from Hemingway's 1940 novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls.* The words are those of the hero of the book, Robert Jordan, who sacrifices his life in war for what he considers a good cause. Not minding being killed by the enemy, Jordan is also willing to commit suicide in order to avoid capture. But he would rather not kill himself. His father had done that, as Hemingway's had, and Jordan judged him a coward for this act. Could Hemingway have also thought himself a coward when he adjourned this life by suicide some decades after writing *For Whom the Bell Tolls*? What a triumph of order over chaos that would have been—a terrible but heroic integrity.

3. During the 1970s, Nuland himself almost became the victim of a pack of doctors who wanted to treat a severe depression into which he had fallen with a pre-frontal lobotomy. If things went as well as they possibly could with this procedure, Nuland would have been turned into an emotionless thing with only enough residual intellect to clean the toilets at the hospital where he once performed surgeries. At the last moment, a doctor friend of his intervened. In his friend's minority opinion, the lobotomy should be postponed until Nuland was first put through a succession of electro-convulsive treatments. This therapy did the trick, and Nuland went back to being a surgeon. Later he became a writer with a mystical worship of the "human spirit" and its Will-to-live, although not in a Schopenhauerian sense. At the close of *How We Die,* Nuland writes: "The art of dying is the art of living." What he does not write is that to practice the art

of living it helps if you have a doctor friend who will keep you from having an unnecessary lobotomy, or a needless surgery.

4. The human instinct to have one's own "way of life" outlast those of others is risibly skewered in Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb.* Faced with the extinction of humanity at the hands of a doomsday device created by the Russians and programmed to be tripped by a nuclear attack on the part of the U.S., American politicians and military officials, at the urging of ex-Nazi scientist Dr. Strangelove, plan to survive by living in mineshafts for the next hundred years, after which they would emerge and, in Strangelove's estimation, "work their way back to the present gross national product within, say, the next twenty years." Worried that the Russians could have the same plan, Gen. Buck Turgidson, with all the foresight one would expect from a man of his position, speculates, "I think we should look at this from a military point of view. I mean, supposing the Russkies stashed away a big bomb, see. When they come out in a hundred years, they could take over!" Another general agrees with Turgidson, who rambles on, "Yeah, I think it would be extremely naïve of us, Mr. President, to imagine that these new developments are going to cause any change in Soviet expansionist policies. I mean, we must be increasingly on the alert to prevent them from taking over mineshaft space, in order to breed more prodigiously than we do, thus knocking us out in superior numbers when we emerge!" The goofball insanity played out in this scene has had audiences soaking their drawers since Kubrick's film was released in 1964. The characters seem to be such funny little puppets as they draw up a survival plan, the success or failure of which they will not live to see. All they request is the hope that succeeding generations will carry on the same goofball insanity that they did. In Zapffe's terms, *Dr. Strangelove* is a work of artistic sublimation. Its audiences can bust a gut watching it and still go

on propagating to secure the way of life it parodies. Should the events of this movie ever be realized, those who emerge from the mineshafts will yelp with glee at its goofball insanity no less than those who went in. George Santayana's epigram "Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it" is one big hoot. Only by repeating history every second of every day can human beings survive and breed. How out of keeping with this fact is the idea that anyone among us would not *want* to be doomed to repeat history. Or that any mortal could possibly learn anything from it that would change our "way of life." That would be the doomsday scenario, the prologue to a melodrama that ends with the entrance of the Last Messiah.

5. Consciousness studies sometimes draw attention to the phenomenological view that at your death the whole world dies because the representation of it that you have inside your head *is* the world, a solipsistic dreamland of your own making. Consequently, there is no possibility of enshrining the world *as you know it* or partaking by proxy—for instance, by sexual reproduction—in the future.

6. In her 1995 book *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament,* Kay Redfield Jamison cites an identical apocalyptic sentiment contained in the letters of the French composer Hector Berlioz, who remarked that in his frequent moments of depression he felt as if he could without hesitation light a bomb that would blow up the earth. Antecedents of Jamison's work are *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) by Robert Burton, *Born under Saturn: The Character and Conduct of Artists: A Documented History from Antiquity to the French Revolution* (1963) by Rudolf and Margot Wittkower, *Voices of Melancholy: Studies in Literary Treatments of Melancholy in Renaissance England* (1971) by Bridget Gellert Lyons, and *The Demon of Noontide: Ennui in Western Literature* (1976) by Reinhard Kuhn.

7. One of the least solid rationalizations ever pitched to the world to soothe our fear of death was made by the Roman philosopher Lucretius, a disciple of Epicurus. Lucretius's rationalization to terminate death-fear is as follows: We accept with great aplomb that we did not exist before we were born; therefore, there is no reason to fear not existing after our death. Neither of the two parts of this proposition is sound. (They would be sound if human beings were consummately rational, but we are not; if we were, then the rationalization under discussion would not need to be put before us.) It may be out of the ordinary to experience fear in connection with the time when we did not exist, but nothing dictates that we cannot look upon it with fear, just as nothing dictates that we must look upon it with fear. We may or may not look upon anything with fear—as Pascal was terrified of the "infinite immensity of spaces" while other people, in the tradition of Lovecraft, do not feel this terror—or we may fear something at one time but not another. As for experiencing fear in connection with the time when we will not exist, no one can dictate by reason that we are mistaken to experience this fear. Like every other emotion, fear is irrational; it is not subject to calculation and cannot be entered into philosophical equations. And whether or not you fear death has nothing to do with what some philosopher thinks is rational or irrational. Epicurus ingenuously believed that you could "accustom yourself to believing that death is nothing to us." While some people can short-circuit their jitters about speaking in public by repeatedly putting themselves in situations where they must do so, no mortal can *practice* overcoming the fear of death in this or any other manner. (This note need not be read beyond this point, the point having been made.) Rationality is irrelevant to our being afraid or not afraid of anything. Those who say that rationality has or can have any relevance in this regard do not know what they are talking about, perhaps most of all when they are talking about the fear of death. One reason

among many for this fear is that we are perfectly capable of visualizing what it is like to be a stiff just like any other stiff we have witnessed in repose while loved ones wept and mere acquaintances checked their watches because they had places to go and people to see who had not been embalmed. This "being-towards-being-a-stiff," as the twentieth-century German philosopher Martin Heidegger might say, is an unpleasant prospect, if only in our imaginations. Another ugly prospect, and one we will be around to experience, is the How and When of our dying. That philosophy is useless in tackling these ultimate issues is a sufficient, although not a necessary, reason for not bothering with philosophy … except possibly to distract or sublimate our consciousness with reference to the How and When of our dying. This fact goes without saying, which is why we do not often say anything about it. When we do say something about it, we say that dying is part of life and let it go at that. Naturally, nothing dictates that we need to fear dying, or nothing that we know of. There are many, many things that nothing dictates we need to fear, and the fact that few people are fearful of these things makes the point. Nothing dictates that we should fear becoming paralyzed below our necks. Nothing dictates we should fear having our legs amputated because they, or some other part of our bodies, might be damaged in a vehicular misadventure. Nothing dictates we should fear having horrible nightmares before we go to sleep or that we should fear waking up with an irritating speck in one of our eyes. Nothing dictates that we should fear going mad or becoming so depressed we want to kill ourselves. Nothing dictates that we should fear bearing children with cystic fibrosis or some other congenital disease. Nothing dictates that parents should have the least fear that their child might be abducted by a psychopath and tortured to death or that they should fear their child may grow up to be psychopath who abducts children and tortures them for his pleasure because that is the kind of individual his psychology dic-

tates he must be. Obviously and absolutely, nothing dictates that we need fear these contretemps or millions of others like them. If anything did dictate our fearing these things, why would we go on living? The answer is that if it were dictated that we should fear the millions of horrors that may befall us, we would go on living because we *already exist.* And as long as we exist, there will be a noisy klatch of philosophers haranguing us with reasons why nothing dictates we should fear death and why everything dictates that we should go on living.

The Cult of Grinning Martyrs

1. No scientist actually knows why or how sexual reproduction came to be, since it is a cumbersome and inefficient means of procreation, or it used to be. The pleasure theory is here emphasized because that is the way things are now, and scientific theories in this area have little existential relevance. It is possible that in the future nonorgasmic pregnancies will become the reproductive method of choice, perhaps for the reason that they may come to yield the best results, genetically speaking. Yet it seems a long shot that sexual activity among human beings will be relinquished, since without such activity there would be no reason for opposite or same-sex genders to bond in a "loving relationship." And that would be the end of the species.
2. For a two-sided view of this topic and a bountiful bibliography on the pain issue, see Roy F. Baumeister, Ellen Bratslavsky, et al., "Bad Is Stronger than Good," *Review of General Psychology,* 2001. For an expanding universe of debate on what may or may not be valid regarding these topics, see all books and essays on sociobiology, evolutionary psychology, and related studies.
3. Contradicting the positive image that is propagated by society, studies cited by Daniel Gilbert—author of the best-selling *Stumbling on Happiness* (2007)—have revealed that, whatever a couple's rationale may be for having children, they can expect newborns in their house-

hold to have a negative effect on their well-being or, best case, no effect. It seems that the two happiest days in parents' lives are the day their children are born and the day they leave home. Naturally, the parents of the world will deny this determination, and well they should. When researchers report that children are not really a source of happiness for their parents, skepticism does seem in order. Mutatis mutandis, the same has been said about people who buy recreational boats, which anecdotally deliver a worse than neutral payback for the pleasures they bring due to the incommensurate effort of their upkeep. The reader is invited to reflect to no avail on any pursuit that is not more trouble than it is worth. As for procreation, no one in his right mind would say that it is the only activity devoid of a praiseworthy incentive. Those who reproduce, then, should not feel unfairly culled as the worst conspirators against the human race. Every one of us is culpable in keeping the conspiracy alive, which is all right with most people.

Autopsy on a Puppet: An Anatomy of the Supernatural

1. Hemingway thought that Pío Baroja, a Basque writer whose works are of a pessimistic, cynical, and atheist bent, was more worthy of the Nobel than he was. As Baroja lay dying in a hospital bed, he was visited by Hemingway. It seems that the well-awarded American wanted to express personally his veneration for Baroja's work before the foreign writer made his final exit. The author of the 1911 novel *The Tree of Knowledge,* a meditation on the uselessness of both knowledge and life, simply sighed "Ay, caramba" at Hemingway's piety.
2. One cringes to hear scientists cooing over the universe or any part thereof like schoolgirls over-heated by their first crush. From the studies of Krafft-Ebbing onward, we know that it is possible to become excited about anything —from shins to shoehorns. But it would be nice if just one of these gushing eggheads would step back and, as a

concession to objectivity, speak the truth: THERE IS NOTHING INNATELY IMPRESSIVE ABOUT THE UNIVERSE OR ANYTHING IN IT.

3. For one of the best accounts by a respected Psi researcher of her long dedication to making a tenable case for paranormal phenomena, see Susan Blackmore's *In Search of the Light: Adventures of a Parapsychologist,* 1987; revised edition, 1996. For a debunking of paranormal phenomena, see the same book.

About the Author

Thomas Ligotti is one of the foremost authors of supernatural horror literature. In this genre, he has been classed with Edgar Allan Poe and H. P. Lovecraft. His works include *Songs of a Dead Dreamer, Grimscribe, My Work Is Not Yet Done,* and *Teatro Grottesco*. Ligotti lives in Florida.